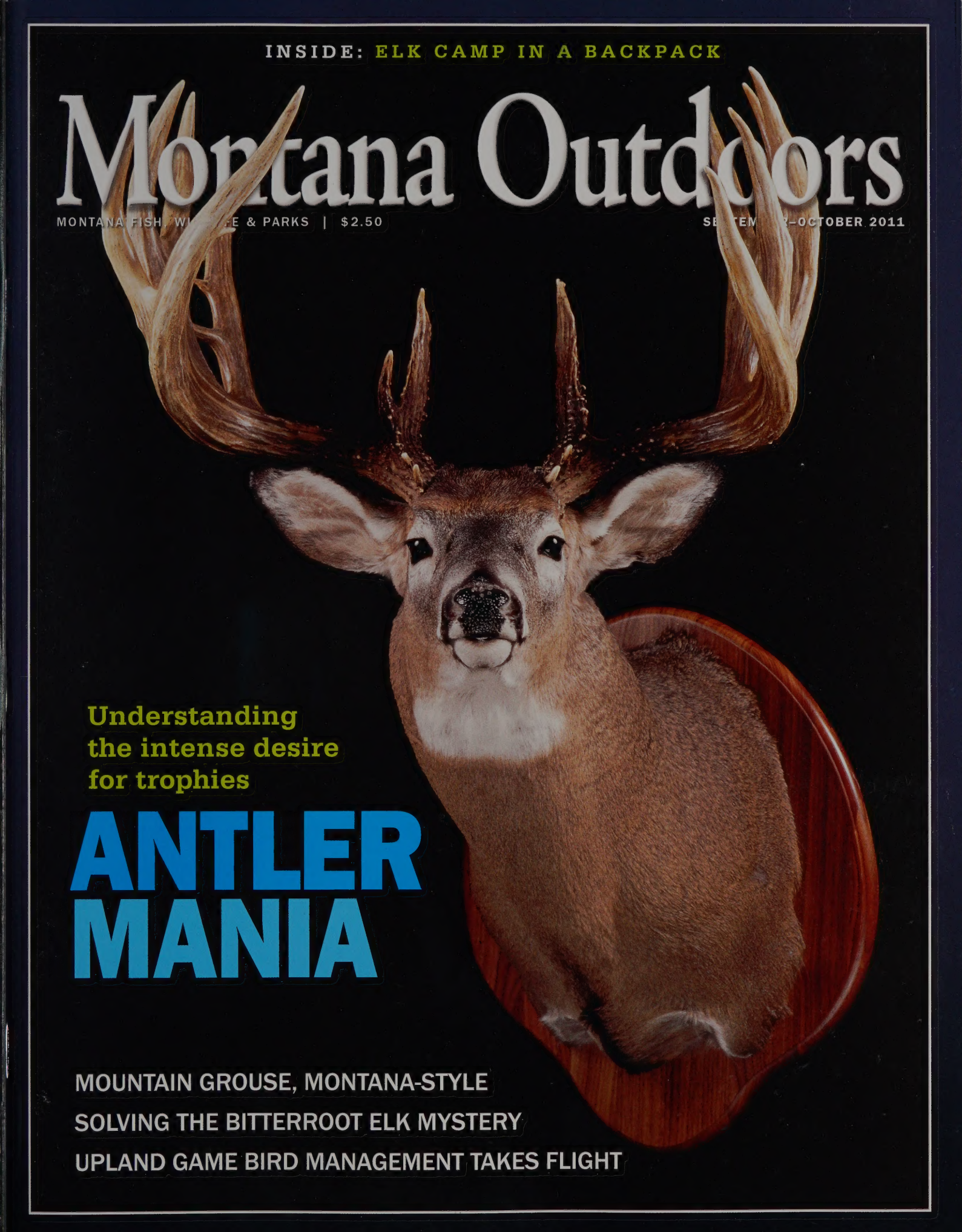
INSIDE: ELK CAMP IN A BACKPACK

Montana Outdoors

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS | $2.50

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2011



Understanding the intense desire for trophies

ANTLER MANIA

MOUNTAIN GROUSE, MONTANA-STYLE

SOLVING THE BITTERROOT ELK MYSTERY

UPLAND GAME BIRD MANAGEMENT TAKES FLIGHT

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HANDSOME FELLOW A male dusky (blue) grouse poses for his portrait. Learn how to find these birds and ruffed grouse on page 22. Photo by Tony Bynum.

FRONT COVER Do trophy deer and elk belong on the wall? See our story about antler obsession on page 10. Photo by Legendary Whitetails (deergear.com).

Spray early rather than big

The article on noxious weeds ("Open Space Invaders," July-August) was both timely and comprehensive. Your readers (and FWP weed control staff) might be interested in a recent study by The Nature Conservancy in Montana, which found that hitting new outbreaks of noxious weeds hard, and controlling small patches early, is more beneficial and more cost effective than focusing efforts on bigger, more prominent areas.

Unfortunately, as the study found, "managers are often mandated to focus on large infestations where weeds are well established and highly visible.... Consequently, resources are directed toward locations where...treatment is less beneficial and long-term success is less likely." In other words, both money and labor would be best spent on an early detection and treatment strategy. The public also plays a crucial role in this battle. Hunters, hikers, and other outdoor enthusiasts are often the first to spot new infestations and should pass this invaluable information on to land managers. Find a summary of the study and a link to the full report at nature.org/weedstudy.

Bebe Crouse
Director of Communications
The Nature Conservancy in Montana

OPEN SPACE INVADERS

Noxious weeds crowd out native plants, ruin rangeland, and cost farmers and ranchers millions. How Montana is fighting back. BY DAVID STALLING

Jilted suitor

I just read "Crazy About Loons" in your July-August issue and felt compelled to describe a recent experience at Georgetown Lake. My wife and I spent an incredible week of peace and solitude in late June at Piney Campground. We camped and boated near what we believed were a nesting pair of loons and an additional loon. The three birds put on daily displays of antics that I can only describe as frenzied. The mated pair tried to ignore the other one, but he never went away and would constantly sneak up on the other two and pester them. I commented to my wife how humanlike he was, and that he displayed the frustrations of a jilted suitor. This went on all week. Their sounds lulled us to sleep each night and woke us each morning.

Our campground neighbors started to pack up Friday morning, saying they were getting out before the crowds came in for the Fourth of July holiday. Little did we know that a rowdy group of youths would soon arrive. They drank, shot off fireworks, and created a general racket of disturbing noise Friday evening. We cut our holiday short and left early the next day. Sadly, so did all three of the loons.

We hope someone at FWP or the Montana Loon Society can put up a sign next year to protect those nesting loons.

My wife and I had no idea there were so few remaining in Montana. Thank you for your efforts in protecting these amazing and curious creatures.

Les Morton
Portland, OR

No paleo-burgers

I am amazed when I read in a recent letter to the editor that the writer actually believed that "hunting is...as valid today as it was in prehistoric times." Not so. If our forefathers didn't kill something, they could not go down to the Burger Barn for a meal. There is no comparison between the survival hunting that occurred long ago and what goes on today.

James L. Altman
Lake City, FL

Offended

I take offense with the anti-hunting letters you print from time to time. I like hunting and fishing, period. Anti-hunters can keep their opinions to themselves. I think that by printing their letters you are giving in to the flower-sniffing crowd.

Perry W. Fast
Big Sandy

Beware line nicks

The inside cover of the May-June issue contained a photo of fishing rods that had lures attached. Your readers should know that attaching lures to the center of the eye of the guide as shown is not a good idea. The hook can nick the line and cause it to break when you have a fish on. It's far better instead to hook the lure into the strut of the guide, where it won't come into contact with the line. This may not seem important until one day you have a lunker on and it breaks your line at one of those nicks.

Tom R. Anderson, Jr.
Bozeman

Corrections

An editing error in the July-August article on the cutthroat trout restoration on Sage Creek in the Pryor Mountains referred to the fish as westslope cutthroats. The trout being restored there and elsewhere in the region are actually Yellowstone cutthroats.

Also, in the sidebar "9 Campgrounds Not To Miss," in the article "Stop and Smell the S'mores," we incorrectly stated that Cliff Lake is nonmotorized. The regulation is a no-wake speed limit.

Editor's note

Montana Outdoors *was again named the nation's top state conservation magazine at the annual Association for Conservation Information (ACI) awards ceremony on July 21 in Cincinnati, Ohio.*

This is the fourth time in the past six years that Montana Outdoors *has won first place in the ACI's magazine category.*

Organized in 1938, the ACI is a nonprofit organization of communicators working for state, federal, Canadian, and private fish, wildlife, and conservation agencies and organizations.

Montana's hunting season never really ends

A hunter recently reminded me of the remarkable number of hunting opportunities in Montana. As people debate wolves, discuss declining public access, and mourn the wildlife losses caused by this past severe winter, it's easy to forget how good we still have it here—and that we need to work together to keep it that way.

It's amazing how much there is to do in Montana with a bow, rifle, or shotgun in hand. A person could conceivably hunt during every month except July. The action began a few weeks ago on August 15, when the 900 series antelope archery season opened. While the rest of us were wearing shorts, T-shirts, and sandals, bowhunters who drew this either-sex license were in full camo crawling across sagebrush steppes searching for pronghorn.

Just around the corner is the start of upland bird season on September 1. That's when some shotgunners head to the mountains for dusky and ruffed grouse, while others take their pointing dogs east to search for coveys of Huns, sharptails, and sage-grouse.

A few days later, archery deer, elk, black bear, mountain lion, and bighorn sheep seasons open. Not long after that come the general firearms moose, bighorn sheep, black bear, mountain lion, mountain goat, and backcountry deer and elk seasons.

It's hard to believe, but thousands of hunters fill their big game tags before summer is even officially over.

October is even busier. At dawn on Saturday, October 1, waterfowl hunters from Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge to the potholes of northern Phillips County sit hunched in their blinds trying to identify duck species winging over their decoy spread. That first hour is often the finest gunning of the season.

On October 8 the antelope and pheasant seasons open. Though pronghorn numbers are down and quotas much reduced, many hunters will still see and harvest antelope this year. The tough winter and cold, wet spring were also hard on pheasants. But that won't dampen the enthusiasm of the many friends and family members who make this weekend an upland tradition. Hotels and restaurants in Culbertson, Plentywood, and Froid will no doubt be packed as usual.

Things will reach a frenzied peak when the general deer and elk seasons open October 22. Many hunters set their shotgun or bow aside, grab a rifle, and head for forests or coulees in search of big game. For the next five weeks, pretty much every firearms season is open, forcing hunters to carefully ration their vacation days and weekends. By mid-November some hunters have filled their tag and switched back to birds, while others are holding out for a big buck or bull. The Sunday after Thanksgiving is a day of mourning for many, as the deer, elk, mountain goat, fall mountain lion, moose, black bear, and bighorn sheep seasons close. (Others give a secret sigh of relief that they don't have to rise at 3:30 a.m. for another year.)

Though most hunters have packed away their blaze orange and camo by December, many waterfowlers are just getting started. The cold weather freezes ponds and streams in Canada, pushing mallards and honkers south. Freezeout, Benton, Bowdoin, and Medicine Lakes will have iced up, but the Yellowstone, Bighorn, Bitterroot, and Missouri Rivers will still be open, attracting birds by the thousands. When the upland bird seasons close January 1, a few diehards are still bundling up at dawn to hunt waterfowl on moving water until the middle of that month.

Some of those hunters, ice forming on their beards and fingers numb from cold, were hiking across a sun-baked prairie five months earlier in search of antelope.

When the waterfowl season closes, it's pretty much all over—except for lion hunters, who go for another few months, as well as the lucky hunters who drew a bison license and have until February 15 to fill their tag. Before you know it, April has arrived, and with it the wild turkey season. Spring black bear season starts not long after that, continuing until May 31 for most hunting districts and June 15 for a few others. Then the cycle starts anew with the 900 series antelope archery season in mid-August.

For some hunters, there is no off-season. Instead, they take an occasional breather between openers—to butcher game, do laundry, and buy ammo. And, most important, beg forgiveness from their spouse.

—Joe Maurier, Montana FWP Director

DONALDMJONES.COM

While hiking across the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness in October, Helena photographer **JESSE LEE VARNADO** came across a hidden cave entrance. "I check out every cave I see because I like to explore," he says. "You never know what you'll find. I've seen cougars, black bears, and one time even a mountain goat."

What he discovered this time was a cave floor covered in ice stalagmites, some up to 3 feet tall. "It was really cold outside, so there was ice on the cave ceiling, and I think warmer air in the cave was rising up and causing the ice to melt and then drip and form the stalagmites," Varnado says. Transfixed by the spectacle, he spent the next two hours photographing the rare formations. "I think I took about 800 shots," he says. "I'd never seen anything like that and tried all kinds of angles. This is one of my favorites." ■

Feds say fishers require no extra protection

JOSH MORE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced in June that the fisher, a secretive furbearer of the Northern Rockies, does not require protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

In 2009 several environmental groups petitioned the federal agency to designate the fisher in the Northern Rocky Mountains (Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming) as a Distinct Population Segment (DPS) and list it as endangered or threatened under the ESA. Among the reasons cited were forest habitat loss, trapping, and the small population. Five years earlier, the USFWS determined that the West Coast fisher population warranted protection as a threatened species but did not officially list it.

During their 12-month review of the Northern Rockies fisher population, federal officials examined new data from Idaho and Montana that showed the carnivores are more abundant and widespread than previously thought. According to Beth Dickerson, a wildlife biologist for the USFWS Mountain-Prairie Region, the agency concluded that, although the Northern Rockies fisher population is a DPS because it is geographically separate from other populations in the United States, it does not need additional federal protection. Dickerson explains that the agency looked at factors affecting population size and range such as current and predicted timber harvest and management, climate change, fire occurrence, forest disease, and trapping.

"We still have a lot to learn about the species in this part of its range, but, based on the available information, we concluded that fishers in the Northern Rockies are not threatened now and won't be in the foreseeable future," Dickerson says. "Fishers still occupy their historic range in the Northern Rockies and have even expanded into some new areas."

Fishers cannot be legally trapped in Idaho, though occasionally one is caught in a trap set for pine martens. Montana allows a regulated total harvest of seven fishers each year, only two of which may be female. "The population in Montana appears to be stable with that level of harvest," Dickerson says. No evidence exists that fishers occupy Wyoming today or that the state ever had a breeding population.

> "Fishers still occupy their historic range in the Northern Rockies...."

David Gaillard of Defenders of Wildlife, who drafted the petition to list the Northern Rockies population as threatened or endangered, called the ruling a "major disappointment." He says the species "may just disappear unless we take swift action."

The fisher is a dark-furred, medium-sized carnivore closely related to and about halfway in size between a wolverine and pine marten. Fishers live in moist, dense mountainous forests at mid to low elevations. They feed mainly on snowshoe hares, red squirrels, deer carrion, and porcupines. Fishers once ranged from Canada as far south as Tennessee. Much of the animal's range has been reduced in California, the Pacific Northwest, the Great Lakes states, and Appalachia.

The fisher's soft, luxurious fur has long been prized by trappers, and the unwary animals were overharvested at the turn of the 20th century. The combination of unregulated trapping, the Big Burn of 1910, and extensive logging nearly wiped out fishers from the Northern Rockies. In Montana the species was considered extirpated, or locally extinct, by the 1930s.

In the early 1960s, 78 fishers from British Columbia were released in Idaho and western Montana to reestablish the species. From 1989 to 1991, FWP used trapper license dollars to translocate another 110 fishers from Minnesota and Wisconsin into the Cabinet Mountains.

In the early 2000s, wildlife researchers studying the success of the translocation projects discovered a native population previously not known to exist. DNA from tissue of a captured fisher in the Lolo area didn't match that of fishers from Wisconsin, Minnesota, or British Columbia. But it matched a sample later taken from a museum specimen at Harvard University originally collected from the Northern Rockies in 1896. The finding indicated that a remnant population along the Montana-Idaho border and central Idaho must have survived.

Latches help close—and open—gates

The toughest job in hunting may not be scaling mountain peaks or dragging elk out of the backcountry but simply closing a barbed-wire road gate. Even the burliest hunter can struggle trying to wedge the post in the bottom wire loop while securing the top loop in place. Add wind, rain, or snow, and the effort becomes downright comical—to the other hunters watching from inside the truck. Farmers and ranchers have less difficulty, learning early in life to hug the two posts together against their body while securing the top loop, but it's still a bothersome chore.

To make the job easier for all, two regional FWP Block Management Programs recruited teenagers to build gate latches, which are distributed to local landowners who participate in the program. The devices also help address a common complaint voiced by landowners: hunters leaving gates open. "Landowners tell us they very much appreciate getting the latches," says Mikey Nye, FWP block management coordinator in Glasgow.

Nye enlisted the help of Future Farmers of America (FFA) students in Hinsdale and Chinook to build nearly 300 of the latches using material supplied by FWP. Coleen O'Rourke, block management coordinator in Bozeman, recruited students from the Shields Valley FFA to build 100 latches.

Nye and O'Rourke handed out the green-painted latches at landowner appreciation dinners held earlier this year.

Nye says the project draws on local youth to both assist landowners and help maintain public access to private land. "It gets the community involved," she says. "It helps the kids understand what the Block Management Program is all about, and how it's a partnership among landowners, FWP, and hunters."

Mikey Nye, block management coordinator in Glasgow, installs a new gate latch that was built by local FFA students.

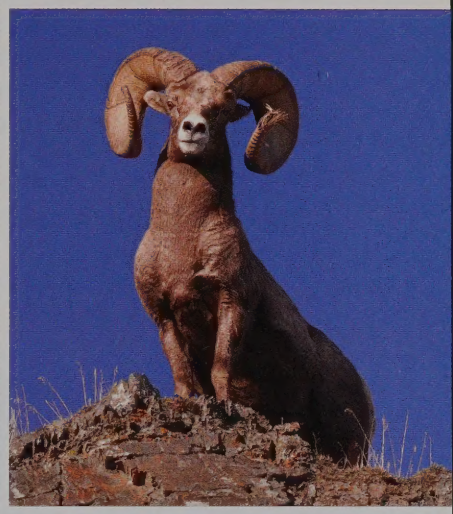
Montana's amazing open-to-all sheep hunt

A bighorn sheep license is among the most coveted hunting tags in North America, usually available only in hard-to-win lotteries. But for decades any resident or nonresident hunter has been able to hunt bighorn sheep in Montana without having to enter a lottery. Montana is the only state that sells over-the-counter bighorn sheep licenses to residents and nonresidents ($130 resident, $755 nonresident). But before you clear a space on the wall for your bighorn ram mount, you need to know a few things about this unique hunting opportunity.

Most of the five "unlimited" hunting districts sit in the rugged high-country wilderness of the Absaroka and Beartooth Ranges north of Yellowstone National Park. Sheep numbers there are low, and the animals live at upper elevations often inaccessible to horses. "That is some of the most rugged country in the lower 48 states," says Tom Carlsen, FWP wildlife biologist in Townsend and author of the state's wild sheep conservation plan. "It's definitely not something everyone is capable of doing."

The total harvest quota for the five unlimited areas is only 10 to 15 sheep each year. Some areas have a quota of only one or two sheep. "As soon as a quota is filled, we end the hunting season in that unit," Carlsen explains. Because these hunting districts are popular, accounting for 40 to 50 percent of the state's total bighorn sheep hunters in recent years, harvest quotas in some districts are met within the first few days of the season.

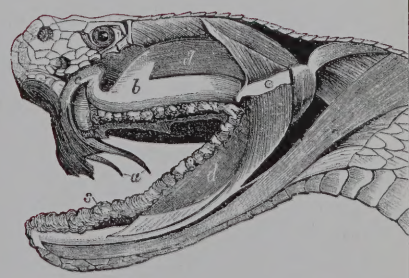
Carlsen says a few outfitters guide in the unlimited areas, but most hunters buying the licenses are experienced woodsmen who pursue sheep on their own. "Hunters who are fit, know what they are doing, and spend enough time out there have a decent chance," he says.



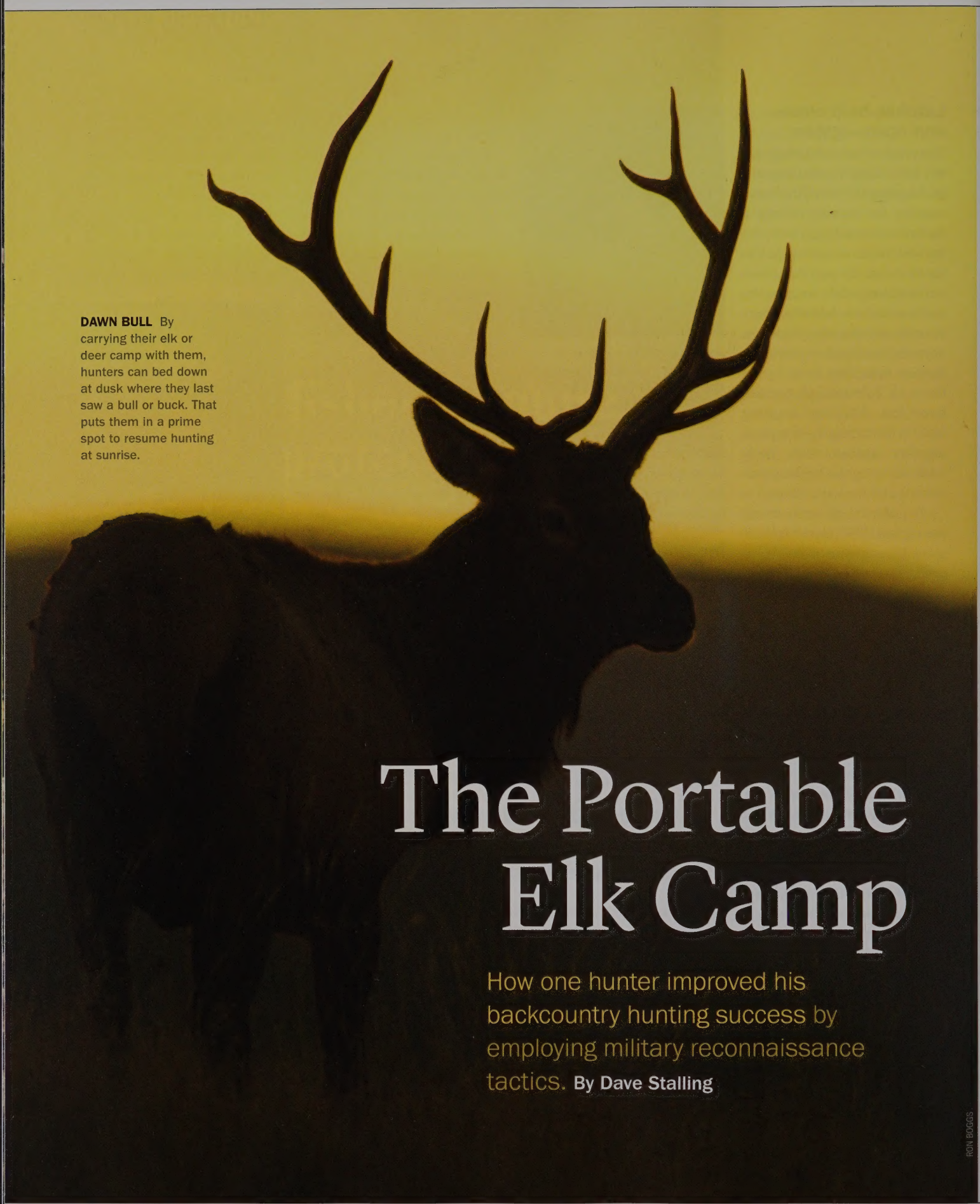
Open season, but no walk in the park.

What should you do if your dog is bitten by a rattlesnake while you're hunting? The most common recommendations from veterinarians:

- remember that most hunting dogs survive a rattlesnake bite, though the pain and swelling are often severe;
- keep your dog calm;
- call the nearest veterinarian office (keep numbers handy) and let them know your dog was bitten;
- don't cut into or apply ice on the bite area;
- administer a children's portion (25 mg. for most hunting dogs) of Benadryl (carry it in your hunting vest) to help calm your dog; and
- walk your dog to your vehicle and drive to the nearest vet.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: FWP; TONY BYNUM; PUBLIC DOMAIN



DAWN BULL By carrying their elk or deer camp with them, hunters can bed down at dusk where they last saw a bull or buck. That puts them in a prime spot to resume hunting at sunrise.

The Portable Elk Camp

How one hunter improved his backcountry hunting success by employing military reconnaissance tactics. **By Dave Stalling**

RON BOGGS

One October evening after chasing elk deep into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, I realized that the traditional elk camp had a major drawback. Several bulls, all bugling up a storm, had enticed and befuddled me the entire day. When legal shooting hours were over, I had to hike 10 steep, rugged miles on a rainy, moonless night back to the stove, food, and little dome tent that comprised my elk camp. A Stellar's jay could have winged the trip in minutes, but it took me five hours of slipping, falling, and cursing. I went to sleep late and woke late, then trekked all the way back to where I'd come from the evening before, hoping to catch another glimpse of those elk. I was spending enormous amounts of time and energy traveling to and from my camp each day that could be spent hunting. Then it occurred to me: Why not hunt as if I were on a reconnaissance patrol?

At the time I was fresh out of the Marines, where for several years I'd served in a Force Recon Company. Our job was to venture on lengthy four-man missions to gather information. "Travel Light, Freeze at Night," was our unofficial motto. When snooping around in places you're not welcome, you can't risk detection. You don't make noise, build fires, or cook food. You pack as little as possible, move carefully, and stay concealed. We would travel for days, even weeks, carrying only a rifle and a butt pack with ammo, a canteen, and a small supply of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). A rubber poncho with a thin, nylon liner served as bedding. When we rested, at least one person kept watch while the others huddled into a human ball covered with the liners and ponchos. It worked for military missions; why not elk hunting?

DAVE STALLING

READY FOR FIRST LIGHT The author settles in for sleep not far from where he watched an elk herd feeding at dusk.

I set out on my next hunting trip wearing only a fanny pack containing a poncho, liner, and a few energy bars. I was determined to go wherever the elk took me and sleep wherever I ended up when darkness fell. With snow blowing in from the northwest, I spent the night on a treeless, windy ridge, where I learned a simple, harsh lesson: A solitary poncho and liner is not as warm as four and does little good without other warm bodies producing heat. I passed the night doing pushups, stomping my feet, and walking up and down the ridge to keep warm, all the while praying for the sun to rise. It wasn't fun, but I survived. And when I heard elk bugling early the next morning , I was into them by first light.

I liked the idea of carrying my camp on my back, with the freedom to follow elk anywhere and sleep anyplace. It was the "freeze at night" part that proved troublesome. Thus began my quest to develop the perfect Spartan, mobile elk camp.

I ended up buying a narrow, fleece, Kevlar-frame backpack into which I pack a Gortex-shell down sleeping bag, rated to minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit. The bag stuffs down smaller than a football and weighs just 3 pounds. I still carry the poncho—to keep me dry while hiking in rain, shelter me if needed, and, when I'm fortunate enough to bone out an elk, keep dirt off the meat. With the addition of a hunting knife, map, and compass, along with several energy bars, some jerky, a survival kit, and a fleece jacket, I've kept the pack to under 10 pounds. (For water I drink from springs.) The pack doesn't slow me down and allows me to draw and shoot a bow with no discomfort.

With my lightweight, portable elk camp I've been able to spend nights in remote places where I've had unforgettable experiences. One night I awoke to what sounded like a pack string of horses clambering up a rocky trail. I watched in the dark as a herd of elk passed only a few yards from where I lay, oblivious to my presence. Another time I woke to see a black bear, perhaps 30 yards away, looking at me curiously. Early one morning I found mountain lion tracks in fresh snow less than 50 feet from my bag. Another time I slept in a grassy avalanche chute, waking up several times to the symphony of bulls and seeing their dark silhouettes under the full moon.

I have been fortunate to take 22 elk using my Spartan camp method. When I kill one and work late into the evening boning it out, I can spend the night nearby (though a safe distance away in case of bears). Then I'm ready first thing in the morning to finish butchering, hang the meat under a spruce or alpine fir (to keep it cool, out of the sun, and away from scavengers), and take my first load out.

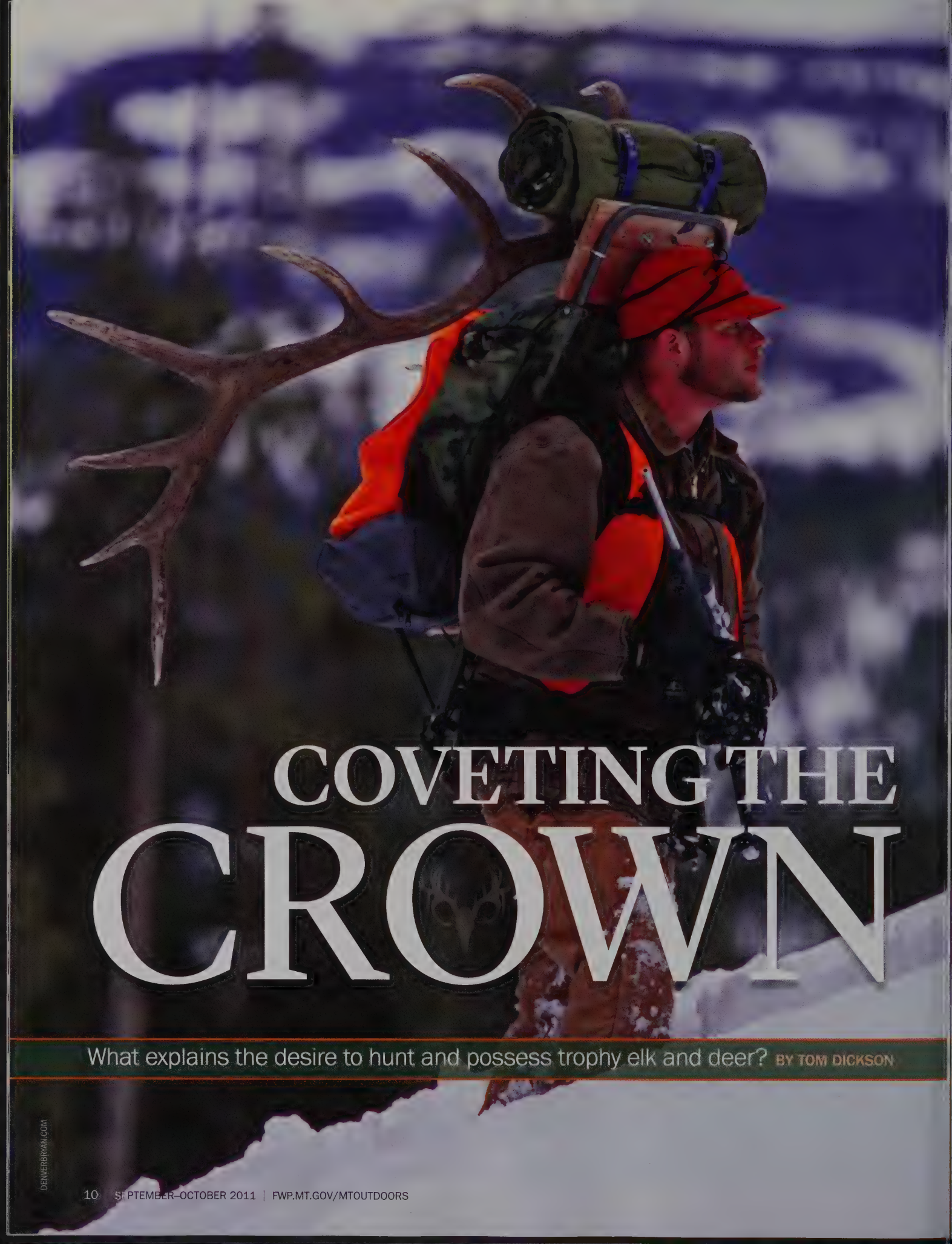
My portable elk camp isn't perfect. I'm often hungry and sometimes lonely. Occasionally bad weather has made me wish I carried more gear. There's a lot to be said for the camaraderie of other hunters and the warmth of a wood-heated wall tent.

But most nights I've been comfortable enough to get some decent rest. Those times when the temperature plummets or heavy snow rolls in, I've been able to retreat to the trailhead and my car. A few times when hunting far into the backcountry, I've set up an "emergency" tent with supplies in a central location I can reach if the weather turns especially nasty.

As for loneliness, it's worth being able to hunt where I want, when I want. I can roam the landscape without the nagging feeling that I have to be back at camp by a certain time.

With elk camp on my back, I feel as wild, free, and as close to a natural predator as a person can possibly feel. I'll take that experience over a cozy night's sleep any day.

Freelance writer Dave Stalling is past president of the Montana Wildlife Federation. He currently lives in Berkeley, California.



COVETING THE CROWN

What explains the desire to hunt and possess trophy elk and deer? BY TOM DICKSON

DENVERBRYAN.COM

Like many hunters, I've always wanted to shoot a big buck and hang its skull and antlers in my office. The thing is, I don't know why.

In fact, I'm not sure why any hunter desires to kill a large-antlered deer or elk and then, after processing the meat, nail the head to a wall. If you don't hunt, pursuing trophies might seem odd, if not repulsive. And if you do, it might be worth considering why so many hunters will crowd around a pickup oohing and aahing over a particularly large bull or buck. After all, we don't behave the same way when gazing at wide-branched trees.

Opinions on why hunters prize oversized racks vary as much as the antlers themselves. The same is true for whether the growing interest in trophies is good or bad for hunting. Many hunters view the pursuit as a noble endeavor upon which North American wildlife conservation was founded. They maintain that trophy hunting represents the pinnacle of hunting achievement, the highest tribute they can pay to big game animals. Yet others point out that the antler scoring system has created intense competition, reducing hunting to little more than golf with weapons. It can lead to addiction and poaching, they argue. And it degrades the hunter's image in the eyes of the nonhunting majority.

Hard as it might be to believe, they're all correct.

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TAKING POSSESSION A successful hunter appears to wear an elk's massive antlers as he packs out the trophy from Montana's Gallatin Range. Hunters have long been fascinated by antlers, including "nontypical" racks such as the one on the famous Hole in the Horn Buck, found dead in 1940 in Ohio, tangled in a chain-link fence.

ABOVE THE STONE AGE FIREPLACE

Humans have been gawking at big-antlered cervids for thousands of years. Caves at Lascaux and Chauvet in southern France are adorned with images of large-antlered red deer and Irish elk painted by Stone Age hunters 12,000 to 40,000 years ago. Since ancient times, deer in Asia have been hunted for what are still thought to be the antlers' aphrodisiac and other medicinal effects. From the 14th to 16th centuries, European nobles "went bonkers for huge antlers," says Valerius Geist, professor emeritus at the University of Calgary and an international authority on deer and elk. Geist says titled aristocrats lined their manor halls with mounts of massive red deer stags to reflect their property's fecundity. "Trophy deer were an expression of the quality of their land, the ability of a lord to produce something exceptional," he says.

The first comprehensive big game records were published by the British taxidermy firm Rowland Ward, Ltd., in London in 1892. The Boone and Crockett Club (B&C), founded by Theodore Roosevelt and a small group of hunting friends, created a scoring system and began keeping records in 1906. The club's goals were to draw attention to the dwindling number of big game species decimated by market hunting and, if a species went extinct, preserve biological data of the largest specimens for future generations. In the 1950s the club released a revised scoring system of measuring key skull, antler, and horn dimensions that is still used today.

For decades trophies were pursued mainly by wealthy sportsmen or hunters hired by scientific organizations such as the New York Zoological Society's National Museum of Heads and Horns. During much of the 20th century, big game populations in the United States had yet to recover, so it was an achievement for a regular hunter to kill *any* deer or elk, much less a trophy. Sporting literature in the 1950s and '60s emphasized woodsmanship and adventure, not record book entries.

As big game populations grew under modern wildlife management, hunters had more opportunities to pass up small bucks and bulls, knowing they would have chances at larger specimens later in the season. At the same time, eastern and midwestern suburbs expanded into forests, and more western ranches closed public access, creating vast new refuges where deer and elk could escape general hunting pressure and grow large racks. In western states like Montana, wildlife biologists managed some areas for larger bucks and bulls using limited entry regulations. Hunters who gained access to areas off-limits to their competition returned home with trophies exceeding their grandfathers' wildest dreams.

Starting in the 1970s, deer expositions such as state and regional "Buckaramas" began popping up in response to hunter demand to view the nation's growing number of large-antlered trophies. Also increasing was the number of hunters wanting to see their name in "the book"—the B&C records maintained at the club's headquarters in

AXIAL GALLERY, LASCAUX CAVE, BY LABOGRAVURE À BORDEAUX

CURIOUSEXPEDITIONS.ORG

ANCIENT INTEREST An Irish elk painted 17,000 years ago in a cave at Lascaux, France, is the most famous relic of humans' early fascination with antlers. That interest grew in the Middle Ages, as European nobles used antlers to show off their land's fertility. Below: The Hall of Hunting at Vajdahunyad Castle in Budapest, Hungary.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

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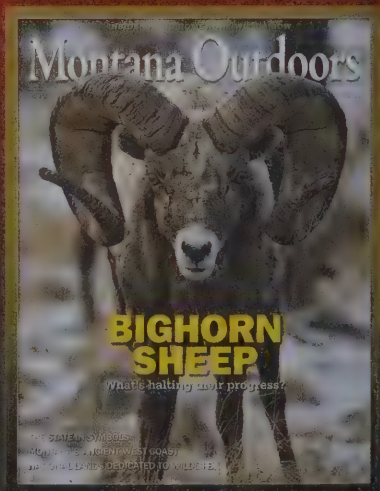

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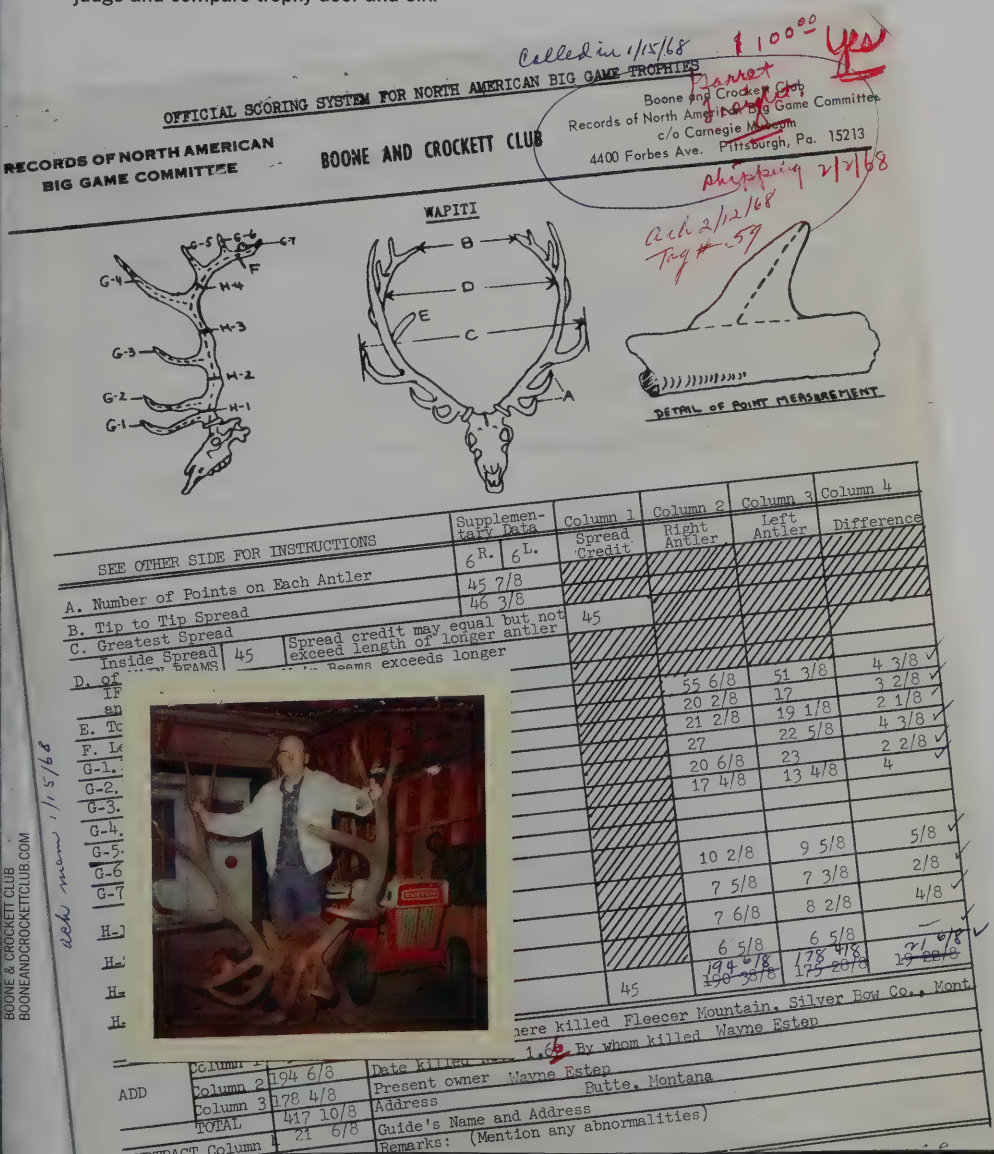
Missoula, Montana, or those kept by the Minnesota-based Pope and Young Club for trophies taken with bow and arrow. By the 1990s, a booming industry in instructional videos and, later, DVDs promised hunters that by following the advice laid out in productions such as "Muley Madness" and "Incredibulls," they could soon be kneeling next to a trophy of a lifetime. Thick catalogs selling calls, blinds, stands, packs, bows, and other gear began arriving in the mail, offering hunters an edge over the competition. The combination of more information, better gear, and booming big game populations sent trophy entries soaring. Between 1830 and 1959, a total of 113 North American elk were entered in the B&C record books; in the single decade of 2000 to 2010, the club entered 573 bulls. Pope and Young entries for whitetail bucks have skyrocketed, increasing 40-fold from the 1970s to the 2000s.

It's one thing to admire the antlers on a big buck or bull. But why kill the animal?

MONTANA MONSTER Documentation for Wayne Estep's 395⅝-point Silver Bow County bull, which won the Boone and Crockett Club's 1967 competition. Since the early 1900s, the club's system of measuring key antler dimensions has been the standard used to judge and compare trophy deer and elk.



BOONE & CROCKETT CLUB
BOONEANDCROCKETTCLUB.COM

WHAT'S THE APPEAL?

Hunters aren't the only ones ogling antlers; just look at the crowds photographing large bulls in Yellowstone National Park. Few people don't appreciate the intrinsic beauty and symmetry of antlers or marvel at unique forms created by drooping tines, mooselike palmations, and abnormally wide spreads. Antlers are also admired for their uniqueness, each possessing its own color, size, and architecture. "Antlers captivate us because they exist in part to awe and convey vitality and strength," explains Jacob Edson, managing editor of *Deer and Deer Hunting* magazine.

Though people have been admiring them for millennia, the purpose of antlers is still not fully understood. Because it takes enormous energy to grow and then carry antlers each year, the structures no doubt provide some evolutionary advantage. In *Deer Antlers: Regeneration, Function, and Evolution*, biologist Richard Goss writes that bucks and bulls use their antlers to advertise fitness to each other and females. But "their ultimate purpose," he adds, "is to enable competing males to test each other's dominance in battle." After facing off, similar-sized males lock antlers and engage in a cervid version of arm wrestling, in which the heavier and stronger animal repeatedly pushes his opponent backward. Bulls and bucks use their antlers also as weapons against each other. Studies have found punctures in the animals' throat, chest, and belly, along with mortal wounds such as perforated lungs and herniated intestines.

It's one thing to admire the gleaming antlers on a big buck or bull. But why kill the animal? Maybe it's a way for some of us to assert our manhood—a "mine's bigger than yours" virility contest (though that doesn't explain why some women covet antlers as much as any testosterone-fueled fellow). A less psychoanalytic explanation comes from a study in the Midwest. It found that hunters begin chasing trophies as a natural progression from taking smaller, more abundant specimens. That was the case with John Wooters, who writes in *Hunting Trophy Deer,* "I'd shot so many deer I had nothing left to prove to myself or others. The challenge and the throat-squeezing excitement were gone." Some hunters say they enjoy the additional planning, research,

aerobic training, and scouting that trophy hunting often requires. Others do it to extend their time afield. "If I shot the first mule deer buck I saw, I'd be done the first morning of the trip," says Steve Rinella, host of Travel Channel's *The Wild Within*. "By holding out for a large representative specimen, I'm able to prolong my trip."

Interestingly, trophies are not a top priority of most hunters. In surveys, they say they hunt foremost to be part of nature, enjoy time outdoors with friends and family, and harvest meat. Yet most hunters also tell researchers that, if given the chance, they would shoot a large-racked bull or buck and put it on display.

It's no surprise hunters want to exhibit souvenirs of extraordinary achievements or experiences. People regularly show off what makes them proud—from quilts at county fairs to photos of grandkids on Facebook. Conservation author John Madson wrote that "trophy antlers recapitulate an intense moment of living." To Geist, trophies are "tangible, artful reminders of all that's involved in a true and honorable hunt." Ken Hamlin, retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks elk research biologist, suspects that hunters display their trophy to show off something rare they've acquired. "It's like having the scarce stamp or rare coin—a status symbol," he says.

In *Heart Shots*, her book on women who hunt, Mary Zeiss Stange describes a mounted trophy as "a symbol of the hunt itself: the memory, the story, the lesson learned about one's relationship with the world beyond the merely human. It is also a testimony to the fact that hunting, good hunting anyway, is inevitably hard work."

A trophy that would require most hunters a lifetime to acquire now can be shot in an afternoon.

SHOWING—OR SHOWING OFF?

To deer hunting historian Robert Wegner, a trophy on the wall "pays noble tribute to the animal. It honors the animal." But for many hunters, the display is meant to convey as much about themselves as it does the deer or elk. It proclaims: "This hunter possesses the extraordinary skills required to take such a rare specimen."

Yet a trophy can be acquired many ways, not all of them requiring strong legs, sharp eyes, and insight into the ways of the animal world. The hunter may have been lucky. Or have connections—like an aunt who owns a ranch closed to everyone but family. Many trophies are taken by those wealthy enough to afford top-notch guiding services. The professional actually hunts the stag while the client only pulls the trigger. There's nothing wrong with that, but it does raise the question of what the trophy signifies when compared to one taken by a hunter who spends five days solo in a backcountry wilderness.

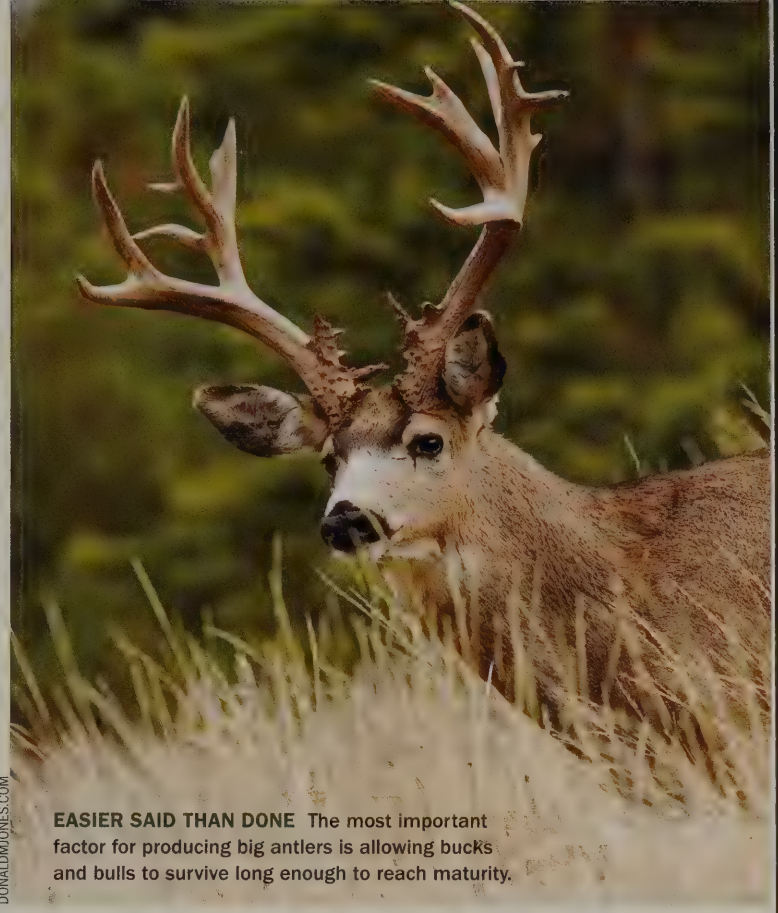
In some circles, how a trophy was acquired is beside the point. All that matters are size and score. Scientists in some states are now breeding deer to create monster bucks sporting misshapen, multi-tined antlers that Geist calls "cancer between the ears" and others deride as "horn porn." These pampered bucks raised in pens on cattle feed grow antlers with B&C scores higher than a trophy bull elk's. Videos of one named Sudden Impact, a monster buck that scores more than 500 points, show the deer struggling to hold its head up under the weight of a sprawling antler formation. It and other freakish farmed bucks produce semen that is bought by other deer ranchers, who in turn raise their own top-heavy whitetails to be sold and traded like prized Angus.

Added to this abnormal animal husbandry is the practice of "hunting" pen-reared or fence-enclosed trophy deer and elk. A trophy that would require most hunters a lifetime to acquire now can be shot in an afternoon. Guaranteed "high fence" hunts for bull elk scoring 370 to 390 B&C points cost $10,000 in Colorado and Saskatchewan. And for $21,500 hunters can shoot, over bait, what one Louisiana deer preserve calls a "Lifetime Super Monster Buck" scoring 280 B&C points. (B&C officials say the organization doesn't recognize entries for live animals or big game killed on high-fenced ranches. It also "strongly disapproves" of its scoring system being used by farms and shooting preserves.)

Some antler fans bag their trophy with a credit card rather than a firearm. Reproductions of record book antlers cost up to $5,000 and can be mounted by taxidermists on any bull or buck head. The genuine article runs much more. The Jordan Buck, for decades the

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING? Antlermania has fueled a deer farming industry that produces massive bucks, such as one named Goliath (far right), with racks larger than those on mature wild elk. Antler obsession has also spawned industries in instructional DVDs, identity labels, and other materials catering to the growing number of self-described "addicts."

Growing Big Racks



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EASIER SAID THAN DONE The most important factor for producing big antlers is allowing bucks and bulls to survive long enough to reach maturity.

Three things determine the size of antlers: nutrition, genetics, and, most important, age. (For information on a controversial fourth factor—rut avoidance—see "The Lazy Stag" on page 17.)

Nutrition refers to the amount, quality, and proportion of protein, carbs, fat, vitamins, and minerals a buck or bull ingests in its lifetime. Some areas of North America have more nutrition in the soil and vegetation—based on climate, geology, and amount of agricultural land. That boosts antler size and development.

Some deer and elk have more genetic potential to grow larger antlers than others. When pen-reared, these bucks and bulls can be bred like cattle for desirable antler size. But doing that in the wild has proved impossible.

No matter how abundant the nutrition and impressive the genes, a buck or bull in the wild can't grow what hunters consider trophy antlers unless it lives long enough to reach maturity—roughly five to eight years for deer and seven to ten for elk. This occurs naturally in areas inaccessible to hunters or difficult to reach, such as national parks, suburbs, some private lands, and rugged mountainous areas like the Rocky Mountain Front. For areas open and accessible to public hunting, additional restrictions are required to produce more older deer and elk.

To protect young bucks from harvest, some states have established antler restrictions, such as making it illegal to shoot bucks with fewer than four points on one side. The restrictions have not worked as planned. They are hard for hunters to obey and put additional hunting pressure on middle-aged bucks that still haven't reached maturity.

A more effective way is to restrict hunter numbers. That's how Montana grows older bulls in the Elkhorns, Missouri Breaks, and Bears Paw Mountains and boosts deer antler size in other areas. Limiting hunter numbers—usually through lotteries—is also how Utah, Colorado, and other western states create areas with more mature deer and elk.

There's a price to pay for producing top-heavy trophies. Limited entry means some hunters rarely get a chance to hunt those hunting districts. And it puts additional pressure on areas that don't restrict hunter numbers. Point minimums and other antler restrictions require many hunters to forgo killing smaller bucks or bulls they would otherwise take.

Some hunters say they would gladly pass up smaller bulls or bucks in exchange for more opportunities to shoot larger ones. But many hunters would not, and say such restrictions cater to a minority of trophy hunters to the detriment of the rest.

Elk and deer hunters across the country continue to debate the issue.

world record whitetail, fetched $250,000, while Bass Pro Shops reportedly spent millions on its King of Bucks collection of more than 200 of the world's largest deer trophies.

PUBLIC DISAPPROVAL

While some see all the money, hoopla, and weird science as harmless entertainment, others find the growing antlermania a troubling trend. Wegner fears that an overemphasis on trophies could erode public acceptance for hunting. "Most people don't approve of killing an animal just to put it on the wall," he says. Studies have shown that only 15 percent of nonhunters disapprove of hunting if the main reason is to procure meat. But 85 percent disapprove when a trophy is the primary goal. Clay Scott, a big game hunter in Helena, understands that attitude. "Instead of celebrating the hunt, some hunters only celebrate the trophy," he says. "It's as if the animal is supposed to reflect some image they have of themselves."

As with other fixations, antler obsession can turn sour. *Field & Stream* editor Anthony Licata writes, "When bucks become just another way to keep score and to feed an ego, people become tempted to cut ethical corners." Or worse. Jim Kropp, chief of enforcement for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, says the combination of greed and self-admiration has fueled a poaching problem throughout the West. He cites cases where poachers kill trophy animals—often at night—hack off the head, and leave the rest to rot. "When people have to have antlers at any cost, that's where we see the illegal behavior," Kropp says.

Others worry that the growing craze for big antlers is reducing public hunting access, resulting in fewer advocates for wildlife. "When deer are reduced to a hot commodity to be bought, regular guys can wind up priced out," writes Licata. Keith McCaffery, retired Wisconsin wildlife research biologist, says that as private landowners sell the rights to hunt big bucks for big sums, "we're facing the loss of hunting opportunity, a loss of hunters, and a loss of a political base of conservation."

Whether or not you agree that antlermania

TRANSFER OF POWER Does the desire to hunt and display trophies come from a longing to possess the animal's power and majesty? To own bragging rights over other hunters? Or is it, as the ecological philosopher Paul Shepard wrote, simply "part of a tradition of venerating the animal"? As the nonhunting majority continues to frown upon trophies, hunters may need to do a better job of explaining why it's so important to them to possess and display exceptionally large antlers of deer and elk.

DAN SAELINGER

sullies wildlife conservation, there's no denying the allure that trophy bucks and bulls continue to hold for many hunters. What accounts for that attraction remains a mystery. For me, shooting a big buck may come from a desire to possess the animal's majesty. A part of me believes that by killing a big deer I'll obtain his power and grace and be welcomed into the natural world. Of course, that's nonsense. With the stag dead at my feet, I remain unchanged—slow, clumsy, forever a noisy intruder in the forest. That may be why I want to retain and display the trophy: to remind myself of how close I came to becoming—if only in my imagination—that thrilling, marvelous creature. I can't possess his essence, but at least I can own some glorious part of him.

In the end, those of us bit by the trophy bug could learn something from the animals themselves, who seem far less attached to their antlers. At winter's end, after putting so much energy into producing these splendid accessories the previous summer, male deer and elk "jettison their debt," writes author Rick Bass in his essay "Antlers." With rutting season done and the coldest weather behind them, bucks and bulls finally relinquish their crowns. The gleaming structures drop off, like leaves from a tree. Writes Bass, "The richness of the antlers, the extravagance of them, cannot be sustained."

JEFF SATTLER

A CENTURY OF RECORDS
The world's most famous trophy elk and deer—including the DeWeese Bull, the Mercer Bull, and Basil Dailey's legendary 1903 whitetail—are featured in two new books recently issued by the Boone and Crockett Club. The volumes include vintage photos and memorabilia from the club's historical archives. Learn more at booneandcrockettclub.com.

RICHARD C. TRAHAN

FERDINAND THE BULL Wake up, it's time to fight.

The Lazy Stag

If Valerius Geist is right, the mighty buck or bull I hope to display someday on my wall might not be the battle-scarred warrior he's supposed to be.

Geist, one of the world's foremost experts on deer and elk, maintains that the very biggest antlers are often grown by what he calls a "shirker" buck or bull. "This is the very rare fellow who, most likely from cowardice, shirks his biological duty by not participating in the rut," Geist says. "He can then put all his energy into growing exceptionally massive antlers. I think that most world-record antlers are probably produced by shirkers."

The theory, dismissed by many other biologists, came to Geist after spending decades observing cervids in North America and Europe. He tells of one mule deer buck he followed over several years. After the deer was badly beaten in a fight with a more aggressive buck, it avoided several subsequent ruts. "During those years of shirking, he grew into a real monster, with a huge body and massive antlers," Geist says.

Geist has studied the techniques of medieval and 20th-century red deer trophy production on European estates. He says that gamekeepers at hunting preserves in the 1930s and '40s deliberately kept red deer stags from participating in the rut so the animals would grow larger antlers. "Good food alone would not do it," Geist says. "They had to prevent rutting activity so the bulls could put their caloric energy into antler growth."

Shirker stags are rarely seen by hunters, explains Geist, "for the simple reason that the biggest bucks and bulls are loners for the most part. They stay away from where you'd expect to find deer or elk."

Geist admits his theory has few fans. "The idea that the very biggest bucks are cowards does not go over well—except with the wives of male hunters. They find it hilarious."

Ready to Go Again

A new dog shows promise and helps heal a saddened heart.

By Dave Books * Illustrations by Bob White

While my veterinarian friend, Steve, studied my 13-year-old Lab's X-rays, I studied Steve's face, looking for a sign of hope. I didn't see one. When he finally spoke, his words hit me like a sledgehammer. "Jenny's riddled with tumors, almost certainly cancer. I'm sorry, Dave." A few weeks earlier, a swelling had appeared under her neck, and a trip to the vet seemed in order. Steve prescribed pills to bring it down. But as the days passed, the swelling grew worse, expanding to her face. Her breathing grew more labored. Something was clearly wrong.

So, in the dead of last winter, I cradled Jenny's head, trying hard not to tear up but not succeeding, while Steve put her peacefully to sleep—a brave, good-hearted black Lab with whom I had shared more than a decade of my life.

There's only one way to fix the hole in your heart left by the loss of a faithful hunting partner. A few months later I pulled into the driveway of South Dakota's Tall Grass Kennels, the back of my truck rigged out with puppy chow, a travel crate, and dog toys. I left with eight-week-old Bailey, a British Lab of mostly Irish ancestry—dogs with names like Lochmuir Bonnie and Turramurra Teal. On the long trip home, during those respites when Bailey slept (she'd already been upgraded to the truck cab), I daydreamed of red grouse and pheasant shoots on Irish estates where gentlemen in tweeds and Wellies shoot classic side-by-sides at driven birds. I imagined Bailey's distant cousins sweeping in after the guns had done their job to ply the time-honored trade of "picking up," the Irish term for retrieving downed birds.

Bailey will never see a driven grouse shoot, but she'll have something even better: a steady diet of duck-blind sunrises, good old American mallards, backwater teal, cornfield pheasants, and grassland grouse.

Now three-fourths grown, Bailey is not yet a finished gun dog, but she's showing promise. Her first opening day has come and gone, and this year's season has flown south too quickly. There will be another hunt or two for tail-end Charlies before closing day, but more to bid a bittersweet goodbye to another year's Grand Passage than to fill the freezer. So, for Bailey and me, it's time to stoke the wood stove, gaze out the window as a north wind whips swirling snow through leafless tree branches, and reflect on the season's events.

Opening day in early October found me and my hunting partner, Joe, trekking through predawn darkness to a pond on a federal waterfowl production area that holds the same attraction for mallards and pintails that a patch of ripe huckleberries holds for bears. With fog blanketing the water, we set out two dozen mallard decoys. Before long, ducks began to return in small bunches, the sound of swishing wings announcing their presence before we could see them. Bailey whined softly, straining to see through the curtain of fog.

Shortly after legal shooting time, ducks appeared over the decoys. Joe and I each fired once, cart-wheeling two birds from a flock of about eight. Bailey retrieved one of the birds, while Joe's two-year-old Lab, Sedge, retrieved the other. A quick inspection confirmed our suspicion: pintails. Early in the season, most pintails in eastern Montana still wear eclipse plumage, making them hard to identify in poor light. Five minutes into the season, we each had the one pintail allowed in the daily bag in the Central Flyway.

We toasted Bailey's first retrieve with hot coffee from my thermos and pondered our dilemma. The rest of the morning would be an exercise in duck identification. We settled into the shoreline reeds to await better shooting light.

Several flocks of ducks came and went while we vacillated. "Mallards, I think," one of us would announce.

"Are you sure?"

"Nope."

Finally the sun climbed above the horizon, melting the frost, scattering the mist, and suffusing the eastern sky in copper and pink. A flock of mallards circled twice and then committed to the blocks. Our salvo brought down two drakes. A short time later, a squadron of blue-winged teal flitted through the decoys; we gave them a two-gun salute, but they continued on their way. Bailey gave me a confused look. I consoled her with a dog biscuit. "Sorry, girl, but you'll get used to it." Before long a small bunch of brownish ducks, long, slender necks outstretched, swept in from the east. We held our fire, suspecting more pintails. Bailey trembled with excitement but didn't break. All those summer training sessions were paying duck-blind dividends.

As the morning wore on, the fog dissipated, revealing a line of golden cottonwoods marking the course of the Milk River half a mile distant. Around 10 o'clock, a large flock of mallards worked the spread, gave in to temptation, and back-pedaled toward the water. Emerald heads gleamed in the sun. We dropped two birds into the decoys and sailed another to the far edge of the pond. After Sedge and Bailey had rounded up the easy marks, Joe sent Sedge for the third bird while I held Bailey back. The greenhead dove as Sedge closed in, but he trapped it in the shallow water and swam proudly back, parading past Bailey as if to say, "That's how it's done, rookie."

We poured more coffee from the thermos and sat back to enjoy the beauty of the day. Another flock of teal, flashing low and fast over

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Freelance writer Dave Books lives in Helena. Illustrator Bob White lives in Marine on St. Croix, Minnesota. This essay, originally published in Ducks Unlimited, *won the 2009 Outdoor Writers Association of America award for best hunting story.*

the spread, interrupted our reverie. This time we spilled two from the bunch, along with our coffee. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the flights began to peter out. We scratched one wigeon from a flock that dropped down from the heavens and circled at the edge of shotgun range a half-dozen times. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the action ceased, leaving us to wonder if it had all been just a dream. But a bagful of ducks and two excited Labradors indicated otherwise.

Later in the season, there would be windless days marked by empty skies, and foul-weather days filled with wing beats. There would be memorable shots and inexplicable shooting slumps, and spectacular retrieves interspersed with lapses in retriever decorum. There would be good luck and bad in all kinds of weather—the lot of waterfowlers everywhere.

One frigid November morning, I waded a river channel to set up for mallards off a brushy island. As I stumbled in the dark, a beaver-cut willow sapling poked through my waders just above the knee. The trip back across the waist-deep channel at the end of the day left me with a boot full of icy water and a dilemma. Would it be better to take off my waders and empty them before setting out for the truck half a mile away? Or should I just slosh along as fast as possible and hope for the best? I was getting colder by the minute, and the thought of struggling out of my waders did not appeal. So I began the grueling slog. Darkness fell, my foot grew numb, and thoughts of hypothermia flitted through my mind. At the truck, I stripped off waders and wet clothes with cold-stiffened hands, fumbled the key into the ignition, and heard the engine roar to life.

Bailey, smelling of river water and her coat stiff with ice, took it all in stride, sneezing and burrowing into her blankets on the passenger seat. We made the half-hour trip back to town with the truck heater running full blast. The next day I bought new waders, good ones made of material tough enough to withstand flying shrapnel.

On another foggy morning on the river, I heard loud splashing coming from upstream. As the mysterious sounds grew louder, the tension heightened. A deer? Another hunter? The Loch Ness monster? Bailey had her hackles up, and I had a firm grip on her collar. Three river otters suddenly emerged from the fog and porpoised through the decoys, chirping messages to one another in a language known only to others of their kind. I don't remember if I shot a duck that day, but the otters remain etched in my memory.

On the morning after Thanksgiving, Bailey and I took Jenny's ashes to the river. Jenny had been put to sleep the previous January, and January in Montana is no time for burying a dog. Cremation seemed the best option, so Jenny's remains went down the road to a pet crematory called All Paws Great and Small. Her ashes had resided in their tin box on my reloading bench for the better part of a year, and now it was time for a final farewell.

I'd kept the ashes all those months because I wanted to spread them during the duck season, at a place on the river where Jenny and I had shared some memorable hunts. Setting out my two dozen mallard decoys—18 on the river side of a willow-covered point that tapers to a sandbar and the rest in the shallow backwater—I thought about the time I winged a greenhead that made it to the middle of the river. The temperature that December morning had been close to zero with a strong north wind spitting snow. Jenny fought the dark current for what seemed like an eternity to bring the bird in, and when she reached shore well downriver, her eyes were nearly frozen shut. After I held my hand over them to thaw the ice, she rolled in the snow, ready to go again.

A hen mallard quacked downstream, snapping me out of my reverie. Bailey shivered with excitement and leaned hard against my leg. "Let's hope I shoot better today, Bail."

When I took the tin box from my shooting bag, a check of my watch showed five minutes until legal time. Duck wings suddenly hissed overhead, and a dozen mallards hovered briefly over the decoys before seeing us standing at the water's edge. I scattered Jenny's ashes in the wind, and the purling river gathered them in. It had already been a good season, and the rising dawn held promise for a new day.

OPEN SHOT A dusky (blue) grouse flushes in a high mountain park, presenting an ideal target. Dusky and ruffed grouse usually aren't so accommodating, preferring to weave their way through shot-blocking trees as they make their escape.

JOHN JURACEK

GROUSE OF THE FOREST

It takes some hiking and brush busting to reach mountain grouse. But the effort pays off with the fastest wingshooting and tastiest game birds around.

BY DAVE CARTY

Back in my younger days, I'd ponder with my like-minded buddies the apparent lack of interest in mountain grouse among other Montana hunters. Ruffed and dusky (blue) grouse offered everything we could ask for: wide-open public access in beautiful country, behavior seemingly designed for pointing dogs and flushing dogs alike, and a delicate, exquisite taste. (A third mountain grouse species, Franklin's or spruce grouse, is not included here because most hunters don't find them edible.)

That was two decades ago, when I was two decades younger. And while I may have grown wiser and my hair grayer, the mountains haven't become any less steep, a fact I'm reminded of on every trip. After a few days of busting my hump in the mountains, even a long day hunting the flat pheasant country of eastern Montana feels like a leisurely stroll. Still, even with all the legwork that's required, I can't figure out why more bird hunters don't get as excited about mountain grouse as I do.

Of course, the way my friends and I hunt dusky and ruffed grouse isn't the norm. Most hunters shoot the birds incidentally on the ground or on a branch while hunting deer or elk. The grouse make a welcome addition to the monotony of base-camp chow. But my buddies and I hunt these grouse only over pointing dogs, and we won't shoot birds unless they are flying.

I can somewhat understand why someone would ground-sluice these game birds or pot one from a tree: In the West, mountain grouse are often called fool's hens. If they won't fly, the thinking goes, then it's okay to shoot 'em where they sit.

The thing is, western mountain grouse seem dimwitted only because they don't get hunted much. I've pursued ruffed grouse extensively in the upper Midwest, where hunting pressure is intense. Believe me, there's nothing foolish about those birds. You can hunt all week, flushing 20 ruffs a day, before running across one that sits in a tree and gawks at you.

Mountain grouse in Montana are far less likely to offer wingshooters a sporting shot by flushing and then flying fast and far, but it happens enough to keep me happy. During the 20-plus seasons I've hunted both ruffed and dusky grouse here, my unscientific estimate is that roughly 50 percent of ruffs and 25 percent of duskies choose to fly to the nearest tree and sit on a branch rather than offer a hard, sporting flush. For those who like to shoot flying grouse over pointing dogs, that's a frustrating number of birds to pass up. Still, because Montana offers so many places to hunt mountain grouse—duskies and ruffs range west of a line roughly from Glacier National Park to Ashland in southeastern Montana—we find enough flying birds to give us plenty of shooting.

RUFFED GROUSE

As a boy, I was addicted to the classic New England ruffed grouse literature of the early 20th century. The thing is, no grouse lived within 200 miles of where I grew up in southern Iowa. What appealed to me most was the style of hunting in those bygone days: English setters, side-by-side shotguns, fedoras, leather gloves. I also loved the settings where ruffed grouse hunting took place—ancient stone walls, abandoned farms, overgrown apple orchards, and, most important, stands of aspen—or, as the locals called them, "popples" (from poplars, of which aspen are a type).

Though Montana's conifer-dominated, stone-wall-free, high-mountain grouse country hardly resembles New England, it contains many stands of aspen that attract ruffs. Almost every time I find a ruffed grouse here, it's among aspens. And because moisture is needed to grow water-loving aspen trees, you'll usually find ruffed grouse in the arid West along stream and creek bottoms, what biologists call riparian areas. These moist soils also grow the snowberries, hawthorn fruit, and forbs such as clover that grouse love.

> Grouse and dogs belong together, like leather boots and Carhartts.

Finding aspen is easy, especially in the fall. Early in the season, drive around national forests looking for drainages with a lighter shade of green than the surrounding conifers. Those are aspen stands. And in early October, aspen are nearly impossible to miss, as they glow a bright yellow from their changing leaves. The best stands for grouse hunting contain a mix of aspen ages. Look for a combination of the younger, dog-hair-thick stands that grouse use to avoid avian predators, mixed with some older, taller trees, where grouse feed on aspen buds during winter.

Aspen stands and other damp places where ruffed grouse lurk are almost always in thick cover, which means they are tough to hunt without a dog. It's possible, especially with two hunters—one wades into the jungle while the other stays outside hoping for a shot at flushed birds—but it's not for me. I think grouse and dogs belong together, like leather boots and Carhartts.

As to the type of dog best for grouse, that's open to debate. I'm partial to pointers, but I've hunted over enough breeds to know that any of them will work if they're trained well and the hunter allows them to do their job. Thousands of Montana ruffs are shot every season over Labs, the most popular dogs in the known universe. A few hunters, and I used to be one of them, hunt over springer spaniels. Spaniels work well on grouse because they thrash around in the brush so their hunters don't have to.

One spaniel fan is my friend John Wright,

JOHN JURACEK

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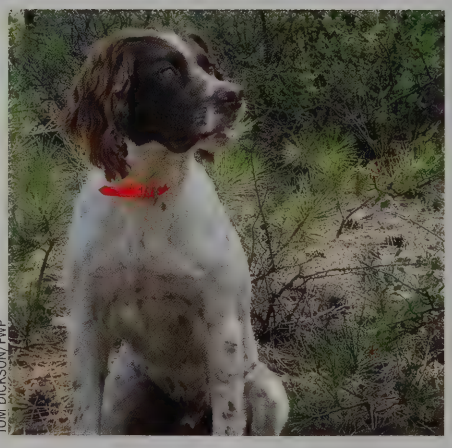

TOM DICKSON/FWP

HUNT 'EM UP A dog isn't essential for hunting mountain grouse, but it sure helps. And two are even better. Pointing breeds, like the English setters above, find grouse on the ground and keep the birds from flushing until the shooter gives a command. Labs and springer spaniels work best for flushing grouse out of thick cover and then finding and retrieving downed birds. Hunters without dogs usually must make do with shooting grouse in trees or on trails because the birds are much easier to see than ones hiding in brush.

REGAL BIRD A male ruffed grouse shows off his gorgeous multi-hued feathers while resting on a drumming log in spring. In fall, hunters find these explosive game birds mainly in mixed-age aspen groves along mountain streams.

who, among other things, is a first-rate trainer of these little dogs. Wright's spaniels are world-class gun dogs that have won dozens of field trials. He trains them on grouse on a friend's ranch behind his Gallatin Valley home. It's fairly typical Montana ruffed grouse habitat: thick and nasty, with plenty of hawthorns and popple thickets. The birds love it.

"I look at dogs as tools in a toolbox," Wright says. "If you're hunting waterfowl, then a Labrador is a great dog. If you're hunting mostly quail and Hungarian partridge, then a pointer or setter is a great dog. And if you're a jack of all trades like I am, then a springer is a great choice."

Wright has proved his point to me on several occasions. A few years ago, the two of us set off from his house, my setter and Brittany coursing before us, two of his young spaniels at heel. When my young setter, Hanna, pointed a bird in a clump of hawthorns, one of his pups got its chance. At Wright's command, the little spaniel darted into the brush ahead of Hanna, thrashed around for a few seconds, then promptly put the grouse into the air above my head. Wright folded it neatly when it was safely away from me. "With springers, you can stand on top above the dogs and shoot everything that comes out, just like we did in that hawthorn thicket," Wright says.

Dave Carty of Bozeman is a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors.

DUSKY GROUSE

In 2006 the Ornithological Union decided that what people along the Pacific Coast have been calling blue grouse for more than a century should be named sooty grouse—and that blue grouse in Montana and elsewhere in the Interior West are a different species, to be known as dusky grouse. Though you won't catch me using the term with my hunting buddies, as a nod to scientific correctness I've employed it here.

While ruffed grouse and dusky grouse both live in mountains, the places where you actually find the two birds couldn't be more different. Reaching ruffed grouse habitat is usually easy walking, but the habitat itself is thick and thorny. Dusky grouse hunting is just the opposite. The habitat itself is grassy meadows and open hillsides. But reaching those places can be murder.

No matter where you find dusky grouse, getting there won't be easy.

Dusky grouse live at high elevations, which means hunters wear out plenty of boot leather getting there. Invariably, where you end up finding these grouse is farther uphill than wherever you start hunting. Even from a trailhead seemingly above the clouds, you'll almost certainly have to climb another several hundred additional heart-pounding, chest-searing feet in elevation before you find birds.

Experienced hunters eventually discover a few hot spots within easy walking distance of a road. Those places are treasures earned by years of hard work, so don't expect anyone to share the locations with you. To find your own dusky grouse habitat, you'll have to do it the same way the rest of us do: Drive up into the mountains, park your truck, and hike straight uphill until you cut feathers.

My GPS has been invaluable in helping locate dusky grouse. I've found that almost all the grouse I flush in southwestern Montana are at 6,500 to 8,000 feet. Most are on south- or west-facing slopes. Unlike ruffs, which hunker down in thickets, dusky grouse prefer open parks broken up with old-growth Douglas and alpine fir.

Except for the wild turkey, no upland game bird consumes a wider variety of foods than the dusky grouse. Knowing what they eat, and when, is key to finding them. My friend Chuck Schwartz, a wildlife biologist and bird hunter, has been analyzing the dusky's stomping grounds, behavior, and eating habits for decades—usually on the business end of a pointing dog's

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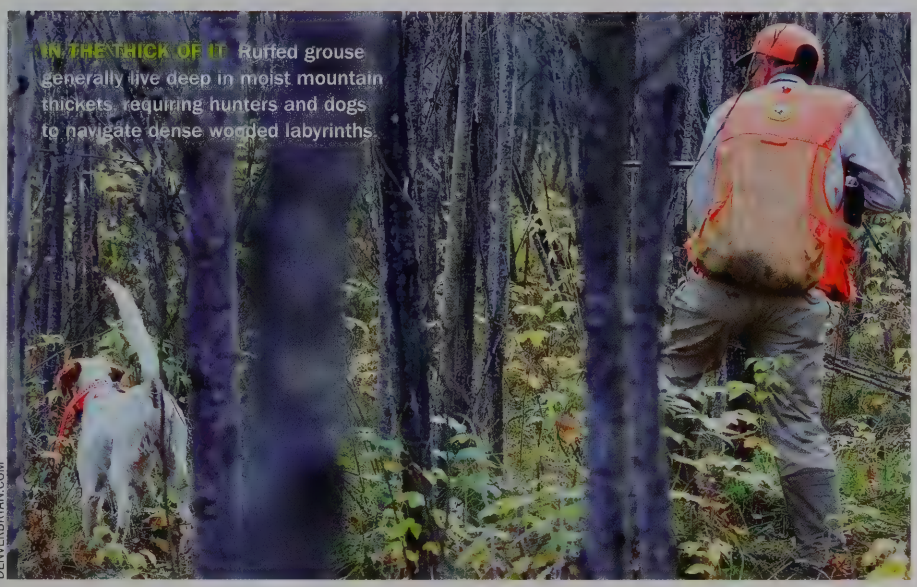
PAT MUNDAY

STEVEN AKRE

FIND THE FOOD, FIND THE BIRDS Dusky grouse change their diet throughout the hunting season. Before the first frost, they hang out along mountain meadow edges feeding mainly on grasshoppers and other insects, along with wild strawberry leaves, clover, and other moist vegetation. By early October, they switch to fruits and berries as well as leaves. Whortleberries (above right) are favorites, as are snowberries (right). Find these fruits in a high-elevation forest opening and you'll likely start flushing dusky grouse.



IN THE THICK OF IT Ruffed grouse generally live deep in moist mountain thickets, requiring hunters and dogs to navigate dense wooded labyrinths.

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nose. "Early in the season, when it opens in September, the birds feed on grasshoppers," he says. "I look for sunny open areas with a mixture of grass and sage next to forested habitat." Schwartz says dusky grouse hang along meadow edges "close enough to the grass to find hoppers, but also close enough to trees for escape cover. I try to hunt south-facing slopes and try to avoid north-facing slopes."

Like wild turkeys, duskies rarely remain in the same spot from one day to the next. Schwartz suspects that the grouse range widely in their daily search for food. After the first hard frost kills most grasshoppers, he explains, dusky grouse begin eating more fruits, berries, and forbs. Like almost every other game bird in the state, dusky grouse love snowberries. I don't know what it is about these little white berries that the birds crave, because I nibbled on a few once and immediately spat them out. But if you can find snowberries bordering a grassy, open glade, dusky grouse are probably close by.

Once snow covers their ground foods, dusky grouse head to higher elevations and feed exclusively on conifer needles. By then most bird hunters have moved on to pheasants in the prairies and left the mountains to elk and deer hunters.

Schwartz says he enjoys hunting behind his two Brittanies and setter because he likes watching them point and prefers the leisurely pace that pointing dogs afford. "I want to walk up behind my dog, as opposed to running behind a [non-pointing] dog worrying about when the bird is going to flush. It's a little more casual," he says.

The dusky grouse is a large bird that weighs between 2 and 3 pounds, about 50 percent more than a ruffed grouse. That doesn't mean they're always easy to shoot. In the woods, an airborne dusky grouse seems to be just as tough to hit as a ruffed grouse, even with its slower takeoff speed.

Yet sometimes dusky and ruffed grouse offer such easy shots that a sporting upland hunter won't pull the trigger. I'm talking about tree sitters. In those cases, your only option is to scare the bird off its perch and take it on the wing. That's a lot harder than it sounds, especially if you're hunting alone. I've found it nearly impossible to throw a stick at the bird and then get my gun up in time to touch off a shot before it flies out of range. A tree flush is easier with two hunters: One throws while the other shoots. Keep in mind that grouse spooked from a branch invariably drop a few feet before leveling out in flight. Also, a grouse almost always flies downhill from its perch; shooters should position themselves accordingly.

I don't recall reading anything in the traditional New England sporting literature about upland hunters having to throw sticks at grouse. But in the Rockies, you hunt birds by a different set of rules.

Those rules may even become the new traditions of the future. Grouse hunting back East has declined with the aging of the region's deciduous forests. It's not entirely farfetched to think that someday a boy or girl in Vermont or New Hampshire, or even southern Iowa, will read this article and dream of hunting grouse here, Montana-style.

Foolish Franklin's

Spruce (Franklin's) are Montana's third species of mountain grouse. They are common in backcountry lodgepole pine and mixed conifer forests. Usually the deeper into timber you go, the more likely you'll find these handsome birds. They range from the Purcell Mountains north of Libby southeast to the Beaverhead and Tobacco Root Mountains.

Male spruce grouse have dark gray feathers, many of them tipped in white. Females, tan with many white spots, resemble sharptails. Both sexes weigh slightly over a pound, making them about half the size of a dusky grouse.

Because spruce grouse live far from humans and are rarely hunted, they appear downright tame. The birds often stand on trails watching curiously as hikers pass by within just a few feet.

The birds' diet of conifer buds and needles makes the meat unpalatable to many hunters, which is one reason spruce grouse are less popular than duskies and ruffs. But some hunters swear the breast meat is edible if soaked overnight in buttermilk or cooked in a casserole with cream of mushroom soup. A few even go so far as to say they enjoy the red meat of spruce grouse simply sautéed in butter.

ARGUING WITH THE TRIGGER FINGER

It can be terribly persuasive. BY BEN LONG

I thought I had everything figured out. That should have been my first clue something was about to go wrong.

Every hunting season I am pulled between two passions. First, I love hunting elk in the high country. A close runner-up is hunting river-bottom whitetails in the snow. Because elk and deer seasons overlap, my heart is torn every fall.

Sometimes that dilemma causes me to make decisions I regret later. A few seasons ago I filled my deer A tag early with a young doe, stocking the freezer so I could focus on the more difficult and time-consuming prospect of chasing elk. The last day of hunting season, I watched a giant buck pursue a doe through the crosshairs of my rifle scope. Lacking a second deer tag, I had no choice but to let the wall-hanger drift off into the timber.

The following year, I figured things would be different. It had been several years since the last hard winter, meaning that the woods contained a crop of old, trophy-class bucks that would have died off otherwise. What's more, the growing whitetail population made wildlife managers generous with doe permits. When the season began, I had a passel of tags in my pocket and felt like some sly card player staring at a good poker hand.

I had drawn a cow elk tag and a doe whitetail B tag to add to my standard A tag, which was valid for a whitetail buck. I figured I could fill the doe tag early, hunt elk the bulk of the season, and still save some late-November days for hunting a mossback buck during the peak of the rut. All figured out.

Opening day found me with friends hunting elk. It was great fun until two buddies each killed an elk—on a mountaintop 4 miles from the trailhead. I took time off work to help backpack the 80-pound loads from the mountain. Despite generous doses of Ibuprofen, my knees were still complaining a week later, when the second weekend of hunting season rolled around.

My tender knees deserved a rest, so I took to the river bottoms after whitetails. This was my chance to fill the B tag and relieve some of the pressure to get meat in the freezer.

A friend, Steve, and I arose early and drove to a logged-over section of a glacial valley, between two snow-capped mountain ranges. Because the chances of encountering elk there were slim, whitetail does were our primary prey.

We split up in the morning gloaming. I'm an impatient deer hunter. My style is to walk 10 minutes, then find a natural blind and wait a half hour or so, occasionally doing some rattling or grunting to attract bucks. My first wait produced nothing but suspicious snorts in the brush.

I cat-footed to the top of a knoll, which offered views of the logged-over swamplands below. A big Douglas-fir stump offered a good place to sit, and second-growth fir and larch provided adequate cover. The morning was balmy, but a breeze made it seem to snow larch needles. The sun cleared the eastern peaks and bathed the forest in rich light. Deer began to move.

The first pair I saw was a doe and a fawn. Call me sentimental, but I wasn't eager right then to shoot a 75-pound fawn or, for that matter, its mother. I let them pass into a stand of aspen.

A moment later deer number three emerged. I gave it a quick once-over in the scope. It was as large as the first doe, but had no fawn. I noticed no antlers. It was an easy 100-yard broadside shot from a sitting position. It was time to fill my B tag.

At the sound of my rifle, deer tails started flagging all over below me. The one I hit staggered and lurched awkwardly toward the others. I fired again as it disappeared into the aspen thicket.

I put another cartridge in the chamber while searching for any sign of my target.

That's when he showed up—a high-crowned buck, high stepping like one of those Spanish horses.

I had the wind at my face. The buck had the sun in his eyes. I put the crosshairs on him and the debate started between my brain and my trigger finger:

"There he is, a buck for your A tag," Trigger Finger said. "Shoot."

Ben Long is a freelance writer in Kalispell and a longtime contributor to Montana Outdoors. *This essay originally ran in* Bugle.

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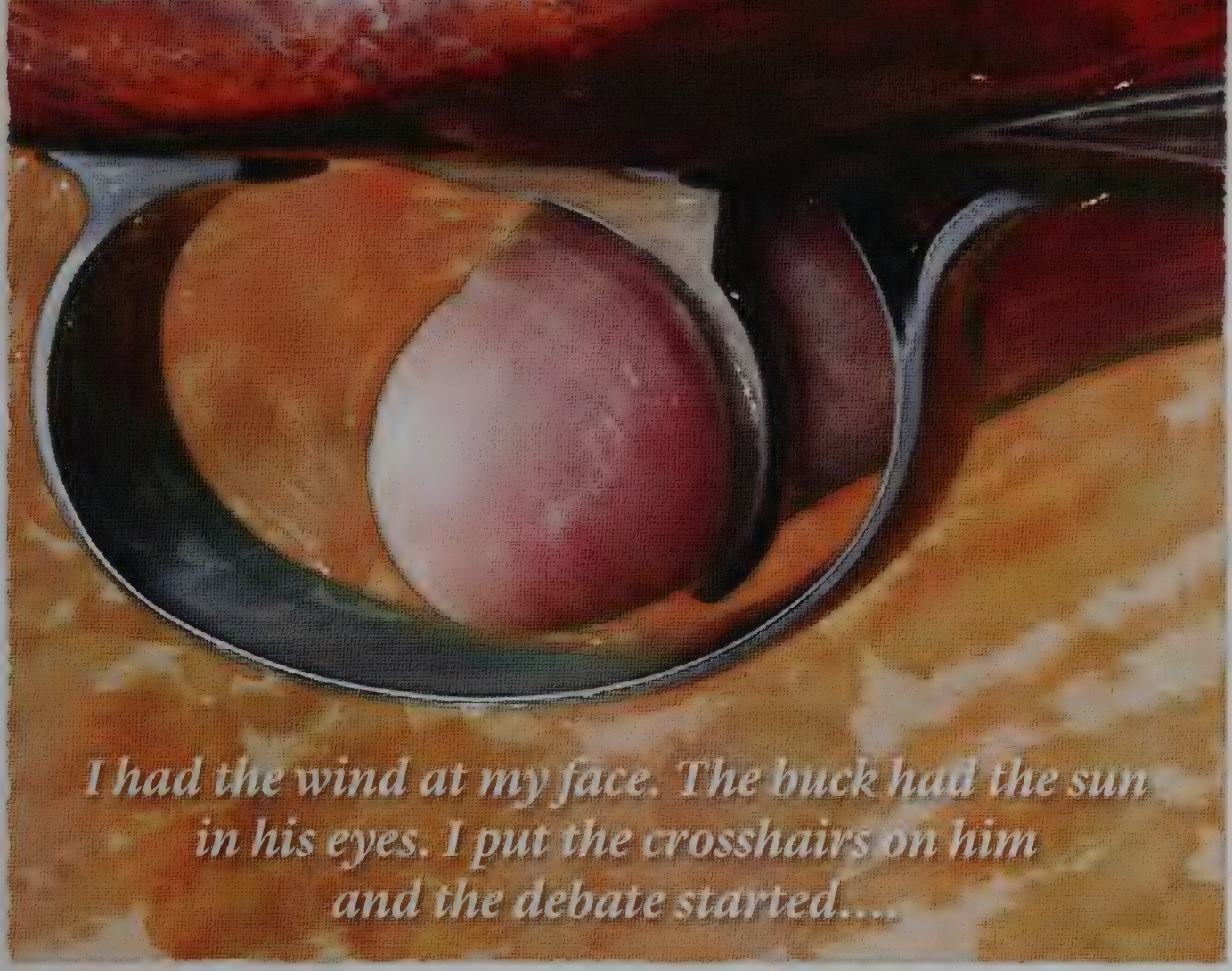


"Now wait a second," said Brain. "You just shot a deer."

"You're allowed two!" said Trigger Finger. "A buck and a doe. Shoot, you idiot, before he makes it to the aspen."

"I'm not sure how well you hit that first deer," Brain countered.

"C'mon, it's dead by now," said Trigger Finger. "You've shot enough deer to know that."

"Yeah, and you've been wrong before."

I used to hunt chukar partridge alone and without a dog in the Owyhee canyons of Idaho. Chukar are a covey bird. You can get doubles on them, but downed birds are easy to lose in the steep, rugged canyons. I learned early the value of following a hit bird all the way to the ground before swinging on the second.

There was something else. "The buck is big, but not that big," Brain said. "Besides, it's still early in the season...."

"Oh for Pete's sake," Trigger Finger interrupted. "Many seasons you've been skunked and would be happy for such a deer. He's standing there. Shoot!"

"Oh, shut up," Brain said.

I stood up from my stump. The buck snorted and bounded off.

I walked to the edge of the aspens and found my deer crumpled a few yards from where I had first hit him. The first bullet had broken both front shoulders and the second had hit the lungs.

My surprise began when I looked at his head.

Two small, thin, 5-inch-long spikes sprouted from the forehead. It wasn't a doe at all, but a yearling buck.

My first reaction was, Of all the bad luck! My plans for hunting big bucks were ruined.

My second reaction was, Of all the good luck! If I had shot the second buck, I would have broken the law.

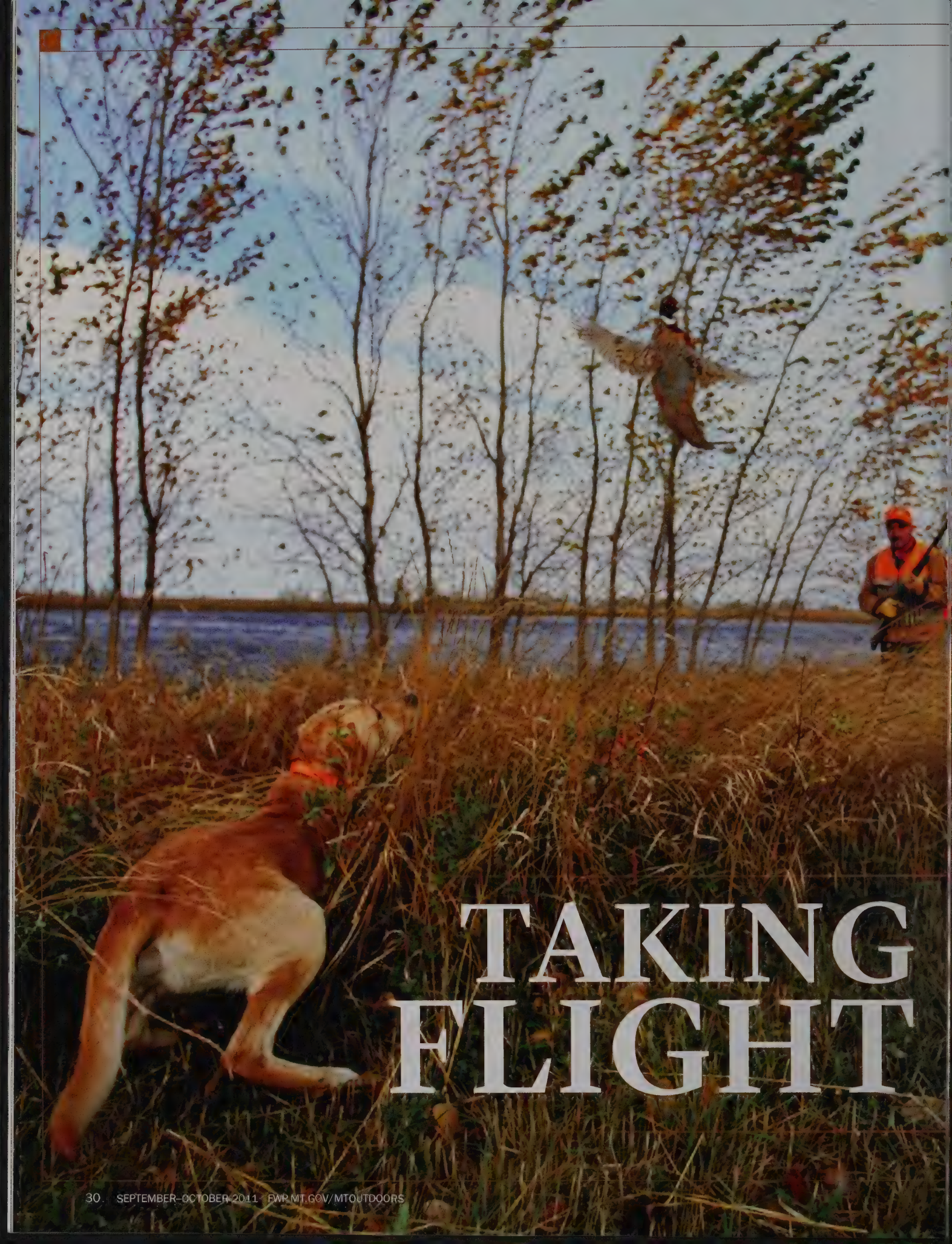
Reality sunk in. The fact is, I'd screwed up. As any graduate of hunter education knows, it's the shooter's responsibility to know what he's shooting at before squeezing the trigger. I should have taken a closer look through my binoculars before even aiming at that deer.

As for passing up the second buck, I made the right decision. But deep inside, I had to admit it wasn't entirely for the right reasons. If he had been the old mossback of my dreams, Trigger Finger may well have won the argument.

As I punched my A tag and began gutting the spike, I asked myself, Was I disappointed? After some thought, I decided that any deer, taken fairly on a beautiful October morning, is a good deer. Any game animal is a gift and should be accepted with humility and honor. Being disappointed with that small buck seemed selfish and greedy, like a child whining because a Christmas present wasn't good enough.

Besides, a young buck taken before the rut is prime meat. And compared to the two elk I had helped haul down the mountainside the previous weekend, packing the little fellow out would sure be a lot easier on my knees.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/FWP



TAKING FLIGHT

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New biologists and more public attention are recharging the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program.

BY DAVE CARTY

The hedgerow in the distance beckoned like a dark green oasis in a sea of white. Like everywhere else in Montana last winter, the rolling wheat fields around Conrad, 45 miles north of Great Falls, had received more than their share of snow. We were now tramping through 6 new inches of the stuff, Diane Boyd's compact little German wire-haired pointer, Hazel, romping ahead of us. We ducked into a line of pine trees flanked by dense rows of golden willow, caragana, Russian olive, and wild plum. Minutes later, Hazel slammed into a point. I could see her 100 yards ahead, nearly hidden by the chest-high wheatgrass between the trees. We tried to close the distance quickly, but the hen rocketed out when we were still 80 yards away and sailed over the prairie. Did I mention these pheasants were spooky?

In fact, neither Boyd—a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks upland game bird biologist in Conrad—nor I got a shot that day. Our dogs simply couldn't hold the educated, gun-shy birds. Every rooster blew out far ahead of us—including many we never saw.

If I had any doubts about the sheer number of pheasants that shelterbelt held, they were quickly erased. A few yards before the end of the hedgerow, I slipped into an open area between the pines and an adjacent wheat field. Packed into the snow were literally hundreds of pheasant tracks—so many it was impossible to see where one left off and the next began. The birds had been there, of that I was certain. But we'd have to do a better job of approaching them next time.

Premium winter habitat like that—along with prime nesting cover and brood strips—is becoming more abundant throughout much of central and eastern Montana thanks to FWP's newly energized Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP). Upland birds have traditionally taken a backseat in the state's wildlife management priorities. No more. The growing public interest in pheasant hunting—and the economic boon to local communities from that and other bird hunting—is raising the profile of upland species. While the UGBEP has been around for more than two decades, only recently have additional funding, new biologists, and a citizen-led strategic plan combined to kick the program into high gear.

Given last year's brutal winter in much of Montana's upland bird range and the rapid conversion of Conservation Reserve Program grasslands into crop fields, the program's new shot in the arm didn't come a moment too soon.

Established in 1987, the UGBEP exists to improve upland game bird populations and hunting opportunities. The program—funded by upland bird hunter license dollars—focuses mainly on creating and enhancing upland bird habitat, especially on private land. Project costs are covered by the UGBEP, as well as funding and in-kind contributions from federal agencies and private conservation groups. Participating landowners contribute labor, though little or no out-of-pocket expenses, and agree to allow some public hunting.

Despite adequate funding, the program for years lacked direction and

commitment from FWP. Because area biologists already had their hands full managing deer, pronghorn, waterfowl, and other wildlife, they had little time left over for upland bird projects. By the 2000s, the program had built up a reserve of funds but had relatively few new projects underway. "One big problem was the lack of a strategic plan to provide over-arching guidance," former state legislator Julie French of Scobey says. "Another was that the department hadn't made it a priority to use the program's dollars to their utmost value."

That concerned former state senator Ed Smith of Dagmar, who authored the original bill creating the UGBEP. He approached French, then in the legislature, and asked if she would push through an audit of the program. She agreed, and the audit led to legislation in 2009 mandating that FWP establish a 12-person UGBEP advisory council representing all Montana regions and composed of landowners, hunters, outfitters, legislators, and biologists, among others. The council was charged with drafting a strategic plan for conserving upland game birds in each region. FWP officials welcomed the audit and the council's recommendations. "The legislative interest has definitely revitalized upland game bird conservation and management in Montana," says Ken McDonald, chief of the department's Wildlife Bureau.

> **"All of this interest has definitely revitalized upland game bird conservation and management."**

The 2009 legislation also authorized FWP to hire new upland game bird biologists. The biologists work on projects that improve habitat for pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, sage-grouse, and other upland game birds on public land and, in cooperation with landowners, private property. Projects include:

- planting and improving shelterbelts;
- creating and enhancing dense nesting cover;
- planting "brood strips"—irrigated areas near nesting sites that produce abundant insects for newly hatched chicks;
- establishing small plots of wheat, barley, and other grains that provide winter food;
- managing livestock grazing; and
- setting up permanent conservation easements, in which landowners are paid to forgo future land development that degrades upland bird habitat.

Though pheasants are the UGBEP's main focus, the program also benefits other upland birds popular with hunters. A project near Red Lodge involves clear-cutting small stands of aspen to regenerate growth to benefit ruffed grouse. Another, in Rosebud County, combines federal and UGBEP funds to pay landowners who own critical sagebrush habitat not to burn, plow, or use herbicides on the native vegetation, which is essential for sage-grouse. The program also pays to trap wild turkeys in population strongholds and release the birds to new sites containing suitable habitat.

Benefitting the landscape even further, the habitat enhancements also conserve water, reduce erosion, and help native wildlife such as grassland songbirds.

One of the new upland bird biologists is Ashley Beyer, whose region around Miles City is largely cattle country. She mainly works with landowners to set up and modify grazing systems that benefit both cattle and upland birds. Under what is known as rest-rotation grazing, pastures are divided into units. Each year some units are fenced off from cattle to allow grasses and forbs to grow for a full season without being grazed. Beyer says rested pastures produce dense bird nesting habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, sage-grouse, Hungarian partridge, and ground-nesting songbirds.

Beyer notes that much of her work complements grazing systems and other upland bird projects set up several years ago by Howard Burt, FWP wildlife biologist in Glendive. "What we're doing now is adding water tanks and altering the fencing to spread out grazing pressure and get it a little more even," she says.

The projects also help livestock and a landowner's bottom line. "By adding water tanks, for instance, cattle are able to use parts

Freelance writer Dave Carty of Bozeman is a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors.

JANUARY REFUGE Dense woody cover is essential for Hungarian partridge, pheasants, and other upland game birds to survive Montana's harsh winters. Even with plenty of nesting cover and food, upland bird populations can die out without adequate winter habitat.

DEDICATED TO BIRDS Two new upland game bird biologists and a new wildlife biologist in Plentywood focus on improving habitat on public land and, in cooperation with landowners, private property. Above: Biologist Ashley Beyer, Miles City, inspects a shelterbelt planting. Below: Biologist Diane Boyd, Conrad, displays roosters she and a friend shot with the help of her German wirehair, Hazel, on public land enhanced with UGBEP habitat projects.

of the pasture they weren't using, allowing other areas to rest," Beyer says. "And because we cost-share 50 percent of the water projects, it's a nice way for folks to get help on activities that also support their ranching operation."

Drew Henry, the new FWP area wildlife biologist in Plentywood, has upland game bird responsibilities similar to those of Beyer and Boyd. One unique project in his area is an agreement between FWP and Sheridan County, under which the county provides an employee who works part-time on private land habitat projects. County officials say they recognize the economic value of upland birds, especially pheasants, to communities such as Plentywood and Dagmar. By freeing up a worker to help plant food plots and work on other game bird habitat projects in cooperation with the UGBEP, the county aims to improve bird numbers, attract more hunters, and further benefit the local economy.

Henry's role in the agreement is to work with landowners to set up habitat projects and then with the county worker to ensure their completion. The biologist says the Sheridan County agreement and other successful UGBEP projects are improving relations between FWP and ranchers and farmers. "The one-on-one nature of doing projects with landowners is great," he says. "There's a lot of direct two-way communication and education. We're able to explain how the program functions, and they tell us more about their needs and concerns. This program is not for everybody, but we're seeing a lot of interest in this area."

Boyd, the Conrad biologist, says as word of the program spreads, she anticipates more calls from landowners wanting to participate. "Most Montanans, even bird hunters, have never heard of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program," she says. "One of our goals is to change that."

So that the UGBEP stays true to legislative intentions, spends money wisely, and evaluates the success and failure

CLOCKWISE FROM FACING PAGE: NEAL & MJ MISHLER; STEVE ALLISON; DIANE BOYD/FWP

of various projects, the 2009 legislature required that the UGBEP advisory council produce a strategic plan. It was no easy task.

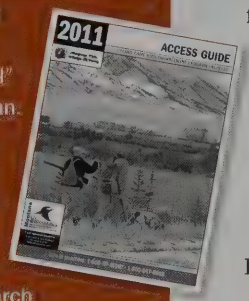
Montana is home to nine upland bird species, each with its own habitat needs. FWP manages the birds in its seven administrative regions, each with its own geography, climate, and opportunities for upland game bird management. Council members met regularly over a period of 18 months to develop the plan, which they released in early 2011. The document—available online at the FWP website (see box at right)—is the most comprehensive survey of Montana's upland birds and their management ever produced. For each region, the plan lists possible partnering opportunities as well as habitat protection and improvement projects. It also summarizes each region's game bird species, public hunting opportunities, and habitat types.

The plan reflects the enormous differences in the seven regions and the widely varying information available about each species, explains Joe Perry, a farmer in Brady and chair of the advisory council. "For instance, in many parts of northwestern Montana the main upland birds are mountain grouse. But there's not much biological data about what you can do to improve mountain grouse habitat, so there's not all that much in the plan on that," he says. "On the other hand, we know a lot about pheasant and sharptail habitat, and a fair amount about sage-grouse habitat. So the plan contains more detail on those species in the central and eastern regions. And of course, the bird of choice for most upland bird hunters is the pheasant, so pheasants get a disproportionate share of the focus." Perry adds that pheasant habitat projects also benefit Hungarian partridge and sharp-tailed grouse.

PLAN AND GUIDE AVAILABLE

The newly released strategic plan outlines a vision and plots a course of action for the UGBEP. Read it at fwp.mt.gov. Search for "UGBEP Advisory Council" and scroll down to the plan.

For a copy of FWP's annual public access guide to UGBEP project locations and pheasant release sites, go to fwp.mt.gov and do a search for "UGBEP."



The new strategic plan acknowledges the importance of FWP teaming up with other agencies and private conservation groups. "Good relationships result in more money and labor for upland bird conservation projects than we could ever do on our own," says Debbie Hohler, UGBEP coordinator. She and the upland game bird biologists work with and receive funding and other assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Private sector partners include Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation, and Pheasants Forever.

Craig Roberts, president of Pheasants Forever's Central Montana Chapter, has been a member of the group since 1993. His chapter has worked on dozens of projects, including the organization's roosterrich Coffee Creek and Wolf Creek wildlife areas near Denton. Roberts draws from a squad of dedicated volunteers. "We have 15 directors and four officers, so there are 19 of us who are pretty dependable for project work," he says. On any given project, Roberts can round up at least a half-dozen volunteers to plant trees, install irrigation systems, and establish grasses and forbs.

Birds aren't the only ones profiting from the projects. By working with Pheasants Forever and other groups and agencies, the UGBEP has been able to open up large amounts of private land to public access. As of July 2011, the program had 366 active contracts that open 320,000 acres to public upland game bird hunting. In another partnership project, the UGBEP is using a grant from the federal Open Fields Program to pay landowners with qualifying small grassland plots, winter cover, wetlands, and other quality upland bird habitat to open their gates to public game bird hunting and wildlife watching.

"People ask me if this is a habitat program, a farm program, or an access program," Hohler says. "It's all three. Birds, landowners, and hunters all benefit."

UPLAND GAME BIRD HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROJECT
Developed through the cooperation of the private landowner and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks.
This is private property. You must obtain permission from the landowner before entering this property.
Landowner Contact Information
Phone:
Name: WALK IN

LARRY KRUCKENBERG

BIRDS THRIVING HERE Signs signify that a landowner is a UGBEP partner and indicate conditions for public hunting access, such as walk-in only.

MANY BIRDS TO BOOST As the state's most popular upland game bird, pheasants get the most attention from the UGBEP and its biologists. But the program also helps expand the range of wild turkeys; funds mountain grouse habitat work; and improves habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, and sage-grouse in grasslands and sagebrush steppes.

COURTESY FROM TOP: PHEASANT, DONALDMJONES.COM; SAGE-GROUSE, KEN ARCHER; WILD TURKEYS, DONALDMJONES.COM; SHARP-TAILED GROUSE, TIM CHRISTIE

Despite the UGBEP's achievements, Montana's upland game birds may soon be in for some tough times. Consecutive hard winters and cold, wet springs have set populations back. Even more worrisome: High grain prices and cuts in federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) payments have convinced many landowners to convert their CRP acres—composed of bird-friendly grasses—to crops. "There's a huge amount of CRP land coming out of the program during the next three years—hundreds of thousands of acres in our region alone," Boyd says. "One of the more important things we can do right now is encourage landowners to re-enroll in the CRP program and not plow those grasslands under."

Hohler points out that UGBEP projects can't make up for the enormous CRP losses any more than they can compensate for bad weather. "But we can still do a lot," she says. "The main thing is for us to ensure that projects are done strategically on sites where they accomplish the most possible for upland birds and bird hunters."

Return to Camp Musselshell

Hunting on the prairie, a dad and his sons find something they thought they had lost.

By Craig Jourdonnais

When they were boys, my sons Adam and Jake would accompany me to eastern Montana each fall for our annual antelope hunting camp. I could not know then how much those trips would later mean to them—or to me.

Our hunting trips to a spot near the Musselshell River in Golden Valley County were the highlight of each year. For a few days, the boys were in paradise—sleeping in a wall tent, eating too many candy bars, and stalking antelope. As a dad showing his boys the ropes of camping and hunting, I couldn't have been happier. In addition to hunting, we had lots of time to sit around camp and do whatever we felt like doing. One year we brought a football and took turns kicking field goals through two tall gateposts sticking up from the prairie grass, miles from nowhere. Each evening we'd recall highlights of the day's hunt and discuss strategies that worked and those that didn't. Inevitably, we'd end up talking about past hunts, recalling the excitement, fatigue, and humor of those adventures. Our annual hunting trips were memory builders, a gift a parent can give that nothing can take away.

Eventually both boys became U.S. Marines and fought in Iraq. Adam joined in 2001 and was sent there twice over the next four years before returning home for good. He told me that memories of our hunting trips helped him find a sense of peace in the chaos of combat. Jake joined in 2005 and spent two years in that war-torn country, often in areas with the worst fighting. One of his toughest nights was after he'd lost a close buddy to sniper fire. He sat in a makeshift foxhole along a street in the city of Karma, thinking of home. Eventually his thoughts wandered to the Montana prairie and hunting pronghorn with me and his brother. Jake told me those memories helped him get through that night. He finally returned home in 2009.

My sons' combat duty forced changes on all of us. Adam and Jake had matured beyond their years, and my hair had grayed considerably from constant worry. Once my sons returned home, all of us were uncertain how their experiences in war would affect their lives. Neither came back with the same burning desire to hunt as before. Though I hoped they might want to revisit hunting camp and experience what we'd shared years earlier, I certainly understood if they decided never to pick up a firearm again.

A father dreams for his children. His heart aches for their well-being. Knowing your sons are in a combat zone is like a nightmare—the one where they are boys playing on a busy street and you're unable to do anything about it. I couldn't comprehend their combat experience. I later found out that the only people who could fully understand what Adam and Jake went through in Iraq were their fellow Marines. I was out of the loop on that one.

Then, last fall, Montana's prairie sunrise once again shined golden on my sons' faces as the three of us searched a sagebrush-filled basin for antelope. After nearly a decade, they had returned to hunt in the land the wind never fills. Setting up our traditional "Camp Musselshell" meant my sons and I were reclaiming activities important to us. Their excitement grew as the trip approached. It seemed that restoring one of their most cherished traditions was helping heal some of the emotional trauma they'd experienced over the previous years.

The trip brought back memories to all of us: smelling the pungent sage, crawling over cactus to spy on unsuspecting pronghorn, eating too many candy bars. We told jokes, shared stories, and ate dinner under the eastern Montana night sky. Never before had I taken such delight in sitting back and observing the laughter and smiles radiating from my sons. These are things only a father understands. They were out of the loop on that one.

Life will never be the same for any of us. But sitting around the campfire we found solace in knowing that some of our favorite traditions had not been lost. Who would have believed this connection would be so strong? Who would have thought that life would somehow weave a pronghorn camp, the Marine Corps, and the dirt streets of Karma together?

When your kids are wearing size four hiking boots and spooking every antelope within three zip codes, it's impossible to ever imagine a day when they will leave Montana—to attend college, follow a new love, or volunteer to fight

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Craig Jourdonnais is the FWP wildlife biologist in the Bitterroot Valley. A version of this essay originally appeared in the Ravalli Republic.

in a distant, dangerous country. Only later, when they've left home, can you know that hunting traditions run far deeper than you ever imagined.

Marines will tell you that in the heat of battle they are fighting for the soldier next to them. In a way, hunting is similar. Sure, there's the wall tent with smoke drifting out of the stovepipe, bucks hanging from the meat pole, pack stock milling in a makeshift pole corral. But when you get down to it, those things aren't the cement that binds so many of us to hunting; people are.

On our trip last fall, I couldn't have cared less if I looked through my scope at an antelope. I savored every moment of just being outdoors with two great guys, sharing time together, and building memories. Antelope hunting was simply the excuse to make it happen.

My boys and I have no idea what tomorrow might bring. But we do know that we squeezed everything we could out of those three days together on that windswept prairie.

CRAIG JOURDONNAIS

HUNTING AGAIN Jake, Adam, and Craig Jourdonnais.

GLENN BRADBURY

Where have all the elk calves gone?

A new study searches for answers in the Bitterroot watershed.

BY DARYL GADBOW

Over the past few years, local hunters and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks officials have been alarmed by a dramatic decline in elk calves in the Bitterroot watershed, long recognized as one of western Montana's premier elk regions. The number of young elk surviving from birth through their first winter has dropped especially low in the West Fork drainage—historically one of the region's top elk-producing areas and most popular hunting locations.

"I've never been anywhere where residents are more passionate about their elk herds and hunting opportunities," says Craig Jourdonnais, FWP wildlife biologist for the Bitterroot area. "People here are very concerned about the decline in elk calf survival."

A new three-year study of elk in the upper Bitterroot Valley—launched by FWP and the University of Montana—aims to find answers. FWP wildlife managers hope study results will help them pinpoint appropriate management tools for reducing elk calf losses. Though overall elk numbers throughout the entire Bitterroot Valley have not declined much in recent years, says Mike Thompson, FWP regional wildlife manager in Missoula, "if you look at the calf:cow ratios, you start to have concerns. We need to figure out what's going on."

Each spring, biologists evaluate elk herd health by conducting aerial surveys to assess how well the previous year's young survived the winter. The higher the ratio of calves to cows, the more likely a herd is growing. Low ratios indicate a poor "year-class" (also known as a "cohort") of elk and signal a declining population. "When you have a poor year-class, you not only don't have those animals becoming adults in a few years but you also lose a generation of both bulls and breeding cows," says Thompson. "Stack up two or more bad year-classes, like we've been seeing in the Bitterroot, and you don't have enough young elk replacing the ones lost to old age, disease, and predation. The population has nowhere to go but down."

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, the Bitterroot Valley averaged roughly 40 to 60 calves per 100 cows and 30 per 100 in the 1990s. The 2009 and 2010 spring surveys revealed calf:cow ratios of only 14:100 and 16:100, respectively. "That's horrible," Thompson says. The ratio in the West Fork, which has declined steadily since 2004, dropped to 9:100 in 2009 and 11:100 in 2010. A modest bump in 2011 increased the ratio to 18:100, "but that's still much lower than where it should be," says Thompson.

Low calf survival in the West Fork has been accompanied by an overall decline in elk in that area. Numbers tumbled from a high of 1,914 counted in the 2005 spring survey to just 764 in 2010.

TOO MANY MOUTHS TO FEED?

Predation, weather, and habitat are the main factors affecting calf survival, or "recruitment." Historically, the Bitterroot contained mountain lions, black bears, grizzly bears, and wolves—all elk eaters. Grizzly bears and wolves disappeared by the mid-20th century, but in recent years the wild canids have returned, restoring another predator to the equation. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reintroduced gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho wilderness areas in 1995 and 1996. In December 2009, FWP biologists counted a minimum of 27 wolves in several packs in the West Fork and a minimum total of 72 wolves in the entire Bitterroot watershed.

Many local hunters and others blame wolf packs for the elk calf decline. "Wolf predation is definitely what people have on their minds," says Thompson. "They may well be right, but we need to know more. That's why we're doing the study. Managing predator numbers is one obvious part of the solution, but if there are other parts, we don't have enough elk calves to waste on trial and error."

In response to low calf recruitment, FWP has drastically curtailed elk hunting in the southern Bitterroot Valley. Cow hunting in the West Fork, Hunting District 250, has been eliminated to protect fe-

Daryl Gadbow is a writer in Missoula.

OKAY, FOR NOW An elk calf flees after wildlife biologists tagged its ear with a radio transmitter. If it dies during the following year, a special signal will help researchers locate the body, where they can learn what caused the death.

CRAIG JOURDONNAIS/FWP

males so they can produce more calves to help offset the young that aren't surviving. "We have to factor in hunters as another significant cause of elk mortality," says Jourdonnais. "When poor calf recruitment fails to replace the elk removed by hunters, we have to restrict harvest."

In addition, the department has increased mountain lion harvest quotas throughout the Bitterroot and lengthened the black bear hunting season in the upper valley. The FWP Commission also set a harvest quota for the 2011 hunting season of 18 wolves in the West Fork and another 36 wolves throughout the rest of the Bitterroot watershed.

Under the direction of Kelly Proffitt, an FWP research biologist in Bozeman, the Bitterroot elk study began last February when researchers captured 44 adult cow elk—18 from the West Fork and 26 from the East Fork. Biologists evaluated the cows' physical condition and determined how many were pregnant before fitting the animals with radio collars containing GPS units. By following radio signals, researchers can plot elk migration routes and locate winter range and calving grounds.

When cow elk began dropping their calves in May, Proffitt and other researchers raced to the sites, eventually placing ear tags with radio transmitters on 66 newborns. When any of the calves die over the next year, the tag will emit a signal that alerts biologists, who will quickly visit the site to determine what killed the young elk.

Proffitt says the study includes another essential component: evaluating the quality of habitat the collared elk use and how it affects the population and pregnancy rates. Once researchers identify summer and winter ranges through radio tracking, she says, they will use satellite imagery to measure crucial forage quality and quantity. The

"Wolf predation is definitely what people have on their minds. They may well be right, but we need to know more."

PERRY BACKUS

NETS FROM ABOVE In February, a helicopter crew used net guns to capture 44 cow elk in the upper Bitterroot watershed. FWP wildlife biologists fitted the elk with radio GPS collars so they can monitor the animals' habitat use and locate newborn calves.

PERRY BACKUS

PINNING DOWN ANSWERS FWP research scientist Kelly Proffitt monitors a cow elk's physical condition with a portable ultrasound device while Bitterroot-area wildlife biologist Craig Jourdonnais clips an ear tag to the animal after fitting it with a radio GPS collar.

information will help Proffitt and others understand the relative importance of predators and habitat to elk survival.

A key part of the study will compare elk populations and habitat in the East and West Forks of the Bitterroot. The East Fork, encompassing Hunting District 270, is considered a better environment for elk, Proffitt says, because it contains less snowpack and more open winter range, as well as a lower wolf density. The steeper West Fork is more rugged and heavily timbered, and it contains a higher wolf density.

Proffitt adds that this year's initial elk captures will be replicated each of the next two years of the project.

FESCUE-ROOTS SUPPORT

The study is co-sponsored by the University of Montana under the guidance of Mark Hebblewhite, associate professor of ungulate habitat ecology at the university's College of Forestry and Conservation. Donations from local sportsmen and private landowners have ranged from $25 to an anonymous gift of $10,000, says Jourdonnais. "We're very fortunate to have that kind of broad-based support," he says. "A grassroots effort generated this study, and so far we've received funding from more than a dozen sources." The U.S. Forest Service, Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, Safari Club International and its Montana chapter, Hellgate Hunters and Anglers, Montana Bowhunters Association, and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation also have contributed.

Jourdonnais says many local hunters have told him they want the study to prove that wolves are responsible for the elk losses. "But mainly what people want is to know the reason, whatever it is," he says.

Tony Jones, president of the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, says he and other club members are concerned and curious. "I'm sure wolves are causing the decline, but I'm interested to see how it all works out," he says. "More than anything, what we hope to find out is what went wrong with calf recruitment and how to fix it before the demise of the Bitterroot elk herd."

> "Mainly what people want is to know the reason, whatever it is."

Thompson says the study couldn't have come soon enough. "The longer that calf:cow ratios stay low, the harder it will be for the population to rebound," he says. Thompson explains that even though reducing the number of predators may be one solution, "we don't know which species and how many to harvest to be most effective. And even though elk numbers might rebound from a reduction in wolves, bears, and lions, we still don't know what it will take to sustain the population in the long run. Is that where habitat plays a bigger role?"

Thompson points out that FWP is responsible for conserving all wildlife, including predators. "So even as we work to understand what's happening to the elk and find ways to fix the problem, we are also conserving the prey that supports a balanced system of large carnivores, which includes hunters," he says.

Thompson emphasizes that FWP isn't waiting for the study's findings before it takes steps to help the Bitterroot's elk population. "We are managing this situation now as best we can with the information that's available," he says. "But we're looking forward to the study results so we can be sure that what we do is the best possible approach."

DONALDMJONES.COM

American Badger

Taxidea taxus***

*Greek for "badgerlike." **Latin for "badger."

By Dave Stalling

A few years ago, I was cautiously crawling through sage and prickly pear north of Dillon, attempting to get within bow range of a bedded pronghorn buck, when movement and noise caught my attention. Only 10 yards from me was a badger busily digging away. Was it hunting a ground squirrel, prairie dog, or burrowing owl? Excavating a new home? I forgot about the pronghorn, remained still and undetected, and enjoyed the rare show for maybe an hour. Though I had spotted their tracks many times, and once sprained an ankle stepping in one of their holes, I had not actually seen more than a few badgers over the years. And for good reason: They keep to themselves and are mostly nocturnal, doing their hunting, roaming, and digging at night. Apparently I'd run into an insomniac, and was the luckier for it.

Identification

The American badger is a member of Mustelidae, a diverse family of carnivorous mammals that also includes the weasel, fisher, and wolverine. With its stout, yellowish-gray body, short legs, and distinct black- and white-striped head, the American badger looks like a cross between a large raccoon, a skunk, and a wolverine. These heavy-bodied animals range from 22 to 28 inches long and weigh 13 to 25 pounds. Their shaggy hair is yellowish around the belly, while the upper body is generally grizzled silver with a white stripe extending from the snout to the shoulders. Badgers also have a thick black stripe running from each ear over the eye to their flat, triangular-shaped snout. A blackish badge adorns each cheek. The tail is small and bushy. Their sharp, 1-inch-long front claws, partially webbed toes, and powerful limbs make them extremely proficient excavators, often able to dig faster than their fleeing prey.

Freelance writer Dave Stalling, past president of the Montana Wildlife Federation, currently lives in Berkeley, California.

Habits

Badgers eat small mammals: mostly ground squirrels but also pocket gophers, moles, marmots, prairie dogs, deer mice, and voles. The opportunistic feeders also prey on ground-nesting birds, such as bank swallows and burrowing owls, and eat eggs, lizards, amphibians, fish, insects, and some plants.

A badger will sometimes hunt cooperatively with a coyote. The canid chases a ground squirrel or other prey into a burrow where the badger can get to it, or the badger will scare the prey out of a burrow where the coyote can catch it. When hunting together, the two predators leave few avenues of escape.

Though they don't hibernate, badgers become far less active in winter—sleeping for up to 30 hours at a time. For shelter they usually dig their own "setts," or burrowed dens, but sometimes use abandoned burrows of other animals, such as foxes. Badger burrows provide shelter for other species, and their digging helps aerate soil, aiding plant growth.

Badgers are mostly solitary, but during the summer breeding season a male will expand his territory to seek out mates, often breeding with more than one female. Like other mustelids, badgers have what's known as delayed implantation. The female's fertilized eggs are inactive through winter, then attach to the wall of her uterus in February. Litters of two or three young are born in March or early April.

A male badger is known as a boar, a female a sow, and a young badger a cub. A group of badgers is known as a cete (pronounced *seet*).

Range and habitat

American badgers are found throughout the western and central United States, and from central British Columbia south to northern Mexico. They range throughout Montana.

Badgers can be found from high alpine country to low valleys in open prairie grasslands, shrub grasslands, deserts, fields, and pastures. They also live in farmlands and other open areas where they can find abundant small, ground-dwelling rodents such as ground squirrels.

Status

Though classified as endangered in Canada, badgers are abundant in much of the western United States. In Montana, badgers are considered a common nongame wildlife species that may be hunted or trapped year-round.

Montana State Library
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PARTING SHOT

CRUISING FOR COVER A flushed rooster sails across a snowy landscape in search of cover. See page 22 to learn what FWP, landowners, and hunters are doing to produce more winter and nesting habitat for pheasants and other upland game bird species. Photo by Jamie Young.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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